MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED

Wataru Watari

Illustration Ponkan⑧

6.5

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5 Based on the aforementioned, **Hachiman Hikigaya** has a hunch.

6 But even so, **Meguri Shiromeguri** is watching.

7 And now **the final meeting** breaks into action.

8 That's why **their festival** won't end.

BT Bonus track!
"When the Flame of That Christmas Candle Wavers..."

Translation Notes

One day, after school... Yukino & Yui
Yui
Yuigahama
Yukino
Yukinoshita

My Youth Romantic Comedy
Is Wrong, As I Expected
Saika
Totsuka

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VOLUME
6.5

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED
Vol. 6.5
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Cover art by Ponkan⑧

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YAHARI ORE NO SEISHUN LOVE COME WA MACHIGATTEIRU.
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MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED

Cast of Characters

Hachiman Hikigaya..... The main character. High school second-year. Twisted personality.

Yukino Yukinoshita..... Captain of the Service Club. Perfectionist.

Yui Yuigahama..... Hachiman's classmate. Tends to worry about what other people think.

Yoshiteru Zaimokuza..... Nerd. Ambition is to become a light-novel author.

Saika Totsuka..... In tennis club. Very cute. A boy, though.

Saki Kawasaki..... Hachiman's classmate. Sort of a delinquent type.

Hayato Hayama..... Hachiman's classmate. Popular. In the soccer club.

Yumiko Miura..... Hachiman's classmate. Reigns over the girls in class as queen bee.

Hina Ebina..... Hachiman's classmate. Part of Miura's clique, but a slash fangirl.

Minami Sagami..... Hachiman's classmate. Member of the second-highest caste among the girls.

Kakeru Tobe..... Hachiman's classmate. An excitable character and member of Hayama's clique.

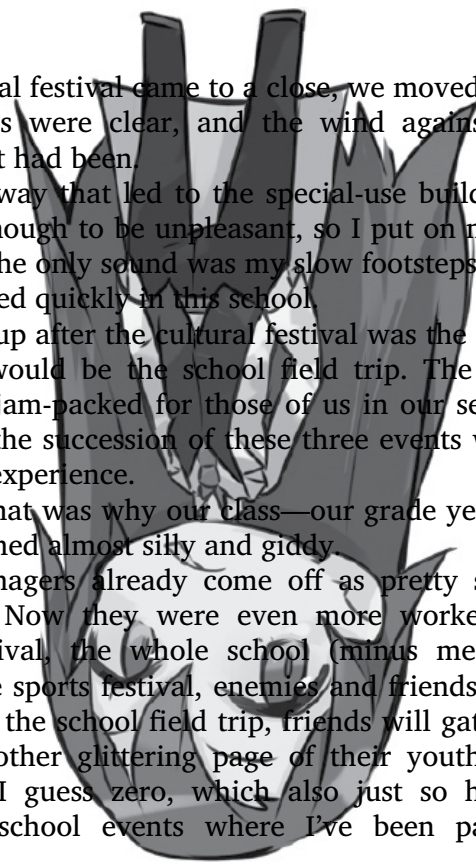
Meguri Shiromeguri..... President of the student council. Third-year student.

Shizuka Hiratsuka..... Japanese teacher. Guidance counselor.

Komachi Hikigaya..... Hachiman's little sister. In her third year in middle school.

1

Yet again, **Shizuka Hiratsuka** gives new orders.



As the cultural festival came to a close, we moved deeper into fall.

The skies were clear, and the wind against my cheeks was cooler than it had been.

The hallway that led to the special-use building was empty. It was chilly enough to be unpleasant, so I put on my blazer again. In the silence, the only sound was my slow footsteps.

Fall passed quickly in this school.

Coming up after the cultural festival was the sports festival, and then there would be the school field trip. The fall schedule was particularly jam-packed for those of us in our second year of high school, and the succession of these three events would probably be a peak teen experience.

Maybe that was why our class—our grade year, even the whole school—seemed almost silly and giddy.

And teenagers already come off as pretty silly and giddy to begin with. Now they were even more worked up. During the cultural festival, the whole school (minus me) comes together, while for the sports festival, enemies and friends all mingle (minus me), and for the school field trip, friends will gather (minus me) to illustrate another glittering page of their youth. Ugh, what's me minus me? I guess zero, which also just so happens to be the number of school events where I've been part of the group. Incredible.

When I opened the door to the clubroom, a sweet smell wafted out, although that wasn't what drew me here.

"Oh, Hikki. Yahallo!" Noticing me come in, the girl cheerfully raised her hand, and her hair bun bobbed a little on her head.

Yui Yuigahama. She's in my class and in the same club as me. She looks like such a modern high school girl, you wouldn't expect her to be casually talking to me, but she wound up settling down here at some point. She's puppylike—or more of a tanuki, really, in terms of how she acts.

The desk in front of Yuigahama was crowded with an array of snacks. It looked like she was in the middle of after-school teatime.

Steam was rising from her mug, and a girl was about to pour black tea into the plain teacup set beside it.

The girl holding the teapot swept back her long, glossy black hair with her slim fingers. Her composed profile was like white porcelain, and the slanting rays of the setting sun colored her in a faint crimson, like the tea.

I don't really know anything about etiquette, but Yukino Yukinoshita's gestures gave me a sense of the quality of her upbringing. I could even be convinced if someone told me she was descended from aristocracy.

Once she was done pouring, Yukinoshita sat down gracefully. "Well then, let's enjoy the tea," she said, and Yuigahama put her hands together.

"Thanks!"

"You're welcome."

There was something about their exchange that was like playing house, but together they made a picture too elegant for me to tease them about it, so I refrained. If there was one thing that didn't belong in the clubroom at that moment, it would definitely be me.

Guess that's why there's no tea set out for me? Could you not subtract me from this equation, too? This was just like that temporary job I did not too long ago as concert staff, where my lunch had been the only one missing chopsticks. I had worried I'd be forced to eat the meal Indian-style. Luckily, there had been a convenience store nearby, so it all worked out in the end, but… Damn you, administrative staff.

"Oh, some for Hikki…," Yuigahama said after bringing the cup to her lips and taking a bite of a homemade-looking muffin.

Yukinoshita must have noticed then, too, as she gently set her cup down on her saucer. Her gaze darted around, checking over the desk. But of course there was no convenient extra cup.

I didn't need their worry or concern, though. A loner is

prepared at all times—since generally speaking, nobody'll help them. "Oh, I've got my own."

I yoinked a drink out of my bag decorated in the signature black and yellow of warning tape. It's already at climax from the moment you start drinking it—yes, it's MAX Coffee. But after every max must come a fall—people like me falling over themselves get more.

I sat in my usual seat and popped open a Max can (a can of MAX Coffee, of course). When it's gone perfectly lukewarm like this, the sweetness of the condensed milk has a real punch to it, and connoisseurs prefer it like this. And considering the high sugar content, I wouldn't be surprised if the SDF were to adopt it as official rations, someday.

If you're ever stranded—MAX Coffee. You should take it with you whenever you head out into the wilderness.

Once we all had our drinks in hand, Yukinoshita suddenly pulled out a laptop.

I'd understand if we were still on the Cultural Festival Committee, but I couldn't really guess why Yukinoshita would have to carry around that laptop now, and I gave her a questioning look.

You know, there's something lewd about the word *laptop*. Sounds like something that would go on at a shady cabaret club. Fun fact: Pulling out your laptop even when you're at a shady cabaret club is one of the top ten signs of overwork. I don't wanna get a job…

While my mind was off somewhere else, Yuigahama was munching away on a muffin and curiously watching what Yukino was doing.

"Why d'you have that, Yukinon?" Yuigahama asked.

Yukinoshita turned on the laptop, and as she waited for it to boot up, she replied briefly, "Miss Hiratsuka made me take it. She said it's for our new activity…" Apparently, there had been no mention of what that activity would be.

The computer seemed rather old, considering how long it was taking to warm up. While she waited, Yukinoshita put her hand to her jaw, patiently watching the screen in her usual thinking pose.

Yuigahama and I peered at the computer from behind her to see that the only thing on the bland, default wallpaper was a text file labeled *Read me!*

I didn't see any other documents that seemed to have anything

to do with our task. With a swipe and tap of her finger, Yukinoshita clicked the file.

To the members of the Service Club:
Your new activity as the Service Club will be to offer consultation through e-mail, titled:
The Chiba Prefecture–Wide Advice E-mail
I ask that all members invest their most sincere efforts in resolving the issues of consultees.

From the Service Club advisor,
Shizuka Hiratsuka

We all had our various reactions to this basic message.

"…I see. I understand the gist of it. Essentially, we need only reply to consultation e-mails we receive with the appropriate advice. But would we even get much of anything…?" Yukinoshita seemed more concerned with the system than the content, scrutinizing the text repeatedly.

Yuigahama, on the other hand, went wide-eyed. "Whoa, was Miss Hiratsuka ever this proper…?"

That's what surprised her? Well, I guess that's typical Yuigahama—or for short, *Typicalhama*.

"Oh, she's always like that over e-mail," I said. "It's shocking, though, considering what she's normally like."

"Is that ri… Huh?" After a contemplative pause, Yuigahama did a double take.

Well, I could understand her reaction. Normally, Miss Hiratsuka is kind of blunt, or, like, bludgeoning, blasting, or a Blastasaur… At the very least, you get absolutely no sense that she can be mannerly, wholesome, or sincere.

"I guess this means she's actually a proper adult," I said, and Yuigahama and Yukinoshita both gave me questioning looks.

"…You're talking as if you exchange messages with Miss Hiratsuka regularly," Yukinoshita said, her tone chilly. Quietly folding her arms, she impaled me with her sharp, piercing gaze.

But it really wasn't anything worth getting suspicious over. "I wouldn't say we're *exchanging messages*. It's more accurate to say, like, she sends me e-mails. Like spam from a mailing list, or

notifications from Amazon or McDonald's and stuff like that. Sometimes she sends me these really long things."

"…Noted. Not that I care," Yukinoshita replied briefly before turning back to her laptop. The sound of her clacking on the keyboard seemed particularly loud.

From behind that sound came a quiet voice. "Long e-mails… I think maybe I just came up with something to consult about…"

Miss Yuigahama there muttering to herself all alone is a little scary… Oh, I'd like to know a way to avoid those superlong e-mails, too, you know? If I don't reply, she actually calls me…

While I was thinking about writing an e-mail to ask for advice, too, the sound of Yukinoshita's typing stopped. "We've received one already," she said.

"Oh, we actually got something? Lemme see." Yuigahama circled around behind Yukinoshita and draped herself over the other girl's shoulders. She's so unperturbed by physical contact—truly a member of the queen bee's posse.

"…You're heavy," Yukinoshita muttered.

What exactly was adding that weight, I wonder? Well, though I have boundless interest in the topic, I got the feeling inquiry into the matter would lead to bad things happening to me, so I chose to ignore that statement and asked, "What'd we get?"

"Um…from someone with the alias Homoo… That's a weird emote."

Oh. I know who sent that.

"You don't have to read that," I said.

Yukinoshita, sitting in front of the computer, must also have been of the same mind, as she put her hand to her temple as if she had a headache and gave a little sigh. "Yes, I think I know what this is…"

"J-just give it a look! Come on, I'll read it out loud!" Yuigahama tugged on Yukinoshita's sleeve.

Yukinoshita seemed a bit annoyed but apparently couldn't resist her puppy dog–style begging. She took Yuigahama's hand and pushed it away as she said, "All right, all right, stop tugging. I'll give it a listen, but I make no promises beyond that."

"Okay! Here we go!" With a little *um*, Yuigahama read out the rest of the e-mail, and Yukinoshita reluctantly adopted an attentive pose.

She's so soft on Yuigahama. What is this, *Comic Yuri Hime*?

While I was zoning out in a rather pleasant mood, watching their *YuruYuri* relationship, Yuigahama continued to read aloud.

Request for advice from alias Homoo:

Since the cultural festival, the relationship between two boys in my class (H. and H.) has piqued my interest.

They're both so hyperaware of each other, it's too shippable! HxH is just filthy! So filthy! Ngh, don't ever stop. ♡

I hope their relationship deepens, but the place they're at with each other now is really doing it for me, so I can't make up my mind. Which way should they take this?

Shippable? Is she going to send us somewhere?

And, like, just what can't she make up her mind about here…? And why'd she bring up HxH? What does *Hunter X Hunter* have to do with this?

While I was dragging my hands down my face, Yuigahama was smiling awkwardly. Yukinoshita, for her part, was no longer even listening to this query and had returned her full attention to the paperback in her hands. *I understand not wanting to get involved in this, but maybe that reaction is a bit much.*

Meanwhile, as Yukinoshita committed herself to ignoring this, Yuigahama looked at the computer screen, my face, and back again, seeking my opinion. "Wh-what do we do about this…?"

Don't ask me. Talk about a certain sudden plot twist for these boys…

"Uh, don't ask me… Whatever you do, it's like this is basically a damned if you do, damned if you don't situation…"

"And we're all damned to listen to this, aren't we…?"

That was a pretty good one, Yukinoshita…

Yukinoshita turned a page of her book and focused a direct stare at both of us. "Does a way to resolve this even exist?" she asked.

Yuigahama *hmm*'d and considered, but after a moment, she said, "…No. Sorry, Hikki," apologizing with genuine sincerity.

What's with this serious vibe? Don't apologize for this! "Hey, could you guys stop assuming Mr. H. is me?" I knew it was, but I couldn't publicly acknowledge that. I had to protest.

That didn't seem to be enough for Yuigahama, though. "But

Hina's always talking about it…"

She's always talking about it, huh…? They say that being the subject of conversation when you're not around is proof of popularity, but I was not glad at all—in fact, isn't this a form of backbiting? And I'm very familiar with that. Regular backbiting would actually be preferable.

Yukinoshita tucked a bookmark into her paperback and closed the book. "But there's no way Hikigaya could have a close relationship with anyone, so the issue here is basically nonexistent."

"Ohhh!" cried Yuigahama. "Okay, then let's call that resolved!"

The both of them went for their teas again as if to say, *Well, that's over and done with*.

What the hell? It's nice that you're rejecting the HxH theory, but you're also rejecting who I am as a person.

"…So you've resolved it, fine, but what now? Shouldn't you reply to the e-mail?" I asked, and both of them put a knuckle to their lips and considered.

"Oh, right…," said Yuigahama. "She's asking for advice, so we've got to reply."

"Well then, Hikigaya. Go ahead."

"Why me…?" It was true that I was closest to the computer, but was it, like, one of those rules? Like whoever gets out of the *kotatsu* has to be the one to get oranges? *What is this, my house?*

I glared at the two girls with the rotten eyes of a man as grumpy as he can get, and Yuigahama scrambled to find a reason. "I—I mean, you're good in Japanese class, Hikki!"

"Yukinoshita gets better grades than me, though…"

Ultimately, I'm third in our grade level. First place is Yukinoshita. And she's above me in all the other subjects as well, so I can't even be frustrated about it; it's more like I'm impressed. Like, whoa. Amazing.

But the fact that I don't get frustrated about it means I *will* get mad about it—because when it comes to grades and competition, she'll give me these smug, triumphant looks.

Even now, her eyes were closed, and she was smiling slightly. Though her expression was peaceful, the way she brushed back her hair was full of confidence. "Hikigaya, the important thing isn't grades."

"So then what is it?"

"Earnestness…though that's not something we can ask from

you, is it…?" Yukinoshita replied immediately to my question, but as she approached the end of the sentence, each word grew more doubtful, and creases formed between her eyebrows.

What's more, even Yuigahama folded her arms and thoughtfully considered with a *hmm*. "Eagerness? …Doesn't have that, either."

"And communication skills are also a no… Say, Hikigaya, what are your redeeming qualities?"

"Don't ask me like you're confused." And what really gets my goat is that her confusion makes her really cute…

I've got tons and tons of redeeming qualities, like, you know, um, well…being full of familial love and stuff. If I said that, though, they'd accuse me of having a sister complex again, so I wouldn't… Oh, there it is. My redeeming quality is my ability to learn these lessons. Though it's a negative growth ability that progressively increases my social withdrawal…

As I was hanging my head a little over my admittedly high levels of misery, Yuigahama attempted to backpedal. "Oh, but, but you seem like you'd be fast at writing essays!"

Yukinoshita also nodded. "Indeed. Not engaging with it seriously may mean it requires less time for you. Your hands are fast, Hikigaya. Isn't that nice—we've found something good about you."

If she was gonna say that to me with such a bright smile, I had nothing to say in reply. I decided to sigh and obediently do as told. "…Fine. I'll reply to the e-mail."

Well, of the three of us, it actually made the most sense for me to be the one to respond. Yukinoshita would probably write something harsh, and with Yuigahama, I think she'd wind up saying something silly.

I pulled the computer close to me and began typing a message.

Response from the Service Club:

We wonder if by some chance this HxH is entirely a figment of your imagination?

We could be entirely wrong, but please consider the possibility. The Chiba Prefecture–Wide Advice E-mail can only convey information via text, so please consider this the limits of the medium.

I slammed the Enter key with a *SMASH*, sending off such a great

reply, you'd think I was a pro psychiatrist. Maybe it was the sense of satisfaction there that made my lukewarm MAX Coffee taste so good.

As I was thinking, *One job down*, there was a *ding* as another window popped up.

"We got another one," I called out to the girls, who were at that moment refilling their cups.

"Then you read it to us, Hikki."

The laptop wasn't very big. Instead of moving it over to them, it'd be easier for me to just read the message aloud. "Sure. It's from the alias *It's your big sister*."

The moment I said that, Yukinoshita's hands froze, the teapot hovering over her cup. "…I think there may be no need to read that."

Her reaction also led me to infer who had sent the e-mail. *Yeah, that seems like something she'd do…*

"Wait, so we're taking e-mails from outside the school?" I asked. How the heck were people getting notified about this?

While I shuddered, Yuigahama's head turned back and forth as she looked over at me, then Yukinoshita. It seemed she still didn't get who'd sent it. She tilted her head, making thinking noises, then clapped her hands. "Ohhh! It's Haruno!"

Correct.

"Well, this is what she does. If you really think about it, we shouldn't be surprised at all by this point…"

So Yukinoshita said, but that was just scary. *Exactly how involved is Haruno with her little sister—hell, how much time does she have on her hands?*

"…Guess I'll read it anyway," I said.

Request for advice from alias It's your big sister:
Yahallooo! Listen, listen!
Lately, my little sister has been so cold to me. >_<
I want to be closer with her! Help me out here. ☆
Thanks in advance, Hikigaya! ♡

"…"

Yuigahama and I were both speechless. Haruno had even picked me out specifically, too…

After I finished reading, Yukinoshita seemed very testy as she turned the page of the paperback in her hands. “We can’t be close as long as she’s sending e-mails like this. Perhaps she should amend such behavior, first.”

That was coming straight from a concerned party, so I figured I could take that as the answer.

I typed in what she said, but I also translated Yukinoshita’s rather harsh wording into common parlance. It’d be a real hassle if this brought up further quarrels. *Listen, this is Service Club work, okay? Do that kind of thing at home.*

“Guess it’s something like this…,” I muttered to myself (my special skill) and looked at the text I’d composed.

Response from the Service Club:
It seems that your knowing every single thing your sister is doing and meddling in her business is the primary reason for her distaste. We suggest reflecting on your own behavior again.

As I was reviewing it, Yuigahama silently stood and sneaked over to me.

You need something? I asked with a look, but she put her index finger to her lips with a little wink to let me know this was a secret.

Standing beside me, she bent over a bit to reach out and tap on the keyboard. With every letter she typed, her pinkish-brown hair swayed and sent a whiff of her floral perfume toward me.

Wahhh… She’s so close…

I automatically leaned slightly away. Even if Chiba is famous for its melons, I think those melons are a little dangerous…

As I remained frozen there, wondering what she meant to do, it turned out she was adding more to that e-mail.

…That’s what Yukinon says, but I think she’s softened up, compared to before. I think you should try waiting a little bit.

Reading that addition at the end, I couldn’t help but smile. It was so very like Yuigahama to write that. Although, I wasn’t confident it would persuade Haruno to give Yukinoshita some space for the time being.

But still, through the course of the cultural festival, I think there's been some progress in the relationship between the Yukinoshita sisters—even if it was only a little. I'm sure Yukinoshita felt the same way.

I don't know in what direction that progress is taking them. I still don't know what's actually between the two of them, and I'll probably never know. That's why this was all we could say right now.

Once she finished reading it over again and checking it, Yuigahama laid a gentle hand on my shoulder.

Taking that as my signal, I sent the e-mail.

Just as the number in the sending queue turned to zero, a *1* appeared by the in-box. It seemed another e-mail had come. I clicked straight to it, opening the unread message.

Then Yuigahama said, "Oh, it's from Yumiko."

Indeed, under *Sender* was written *yumiko* ☆. The star aside, if you were talking about any *yumiko* in this school, the first to come to mind was Miura.

"Going with her real name, even here, huh?"

"Yumiko's pretty bold… Ah-ha-ha." Yuigahama smiled with some chagrin.

She is the queen, after all. As the apex predator of the school food chain, she lacks any defensive instincts. Well, that's no problem, since at this school, about the only thing likely to harm Miura is an irregular presence such as Yukinoshita.

But this was pretty dangerous. This was just within the school, so it was fine, but in our information-reliant society and on the Internet, exposure of personal data is risky business. Once, when I was in middle school, my e-mail address and cell phone number were posted on some kind of dating site, and I made lots of Internet relationships and got freaked out by fake bills. That was really scary.

Though I didn't have to fuss over it, I figured I might as well inform her of that danger. "Yuigahama, writing your real name online often doesn't end well, so you should let her know that."

"Huh? It's fine for this kinda thing, isn't it?"

"Well, this isn't so bad. But she's got to keep it in mind, or it'll escalate."

It's just my name; it's just one photo; it's just one thing that happened today. But even if each one of those things isn't a big deal,

if you put them all together, it's easy to identify you.

When I explained this sort of thing simply to Yuigahama, Yukinoshita closed her book and nodded appreciatively. "You really are an expert in the realm of risk management… You don't even use your real name in class. Credit where credit is due."

"It's just that they don't remember my name, though," I shot back, and Yukinoshita gave me a chastened, apologetic expression.

"Oh my, really…? I'm sorry, Hickory Stick."

"Yukinon, I don't think anyone would mess it up *that* bad!"

"That's right." I nodded. "I'm nowhere near as pleasant as Hickory Sticks."

"Even your comeback is sad!"

Oh, I'm not hurt at all, really. I really am used to it at this point, I guess.

"More importantly, what does Miura's e-mail say?" Yukinoshita straightened in her seat, facing us once more.

Oh, you suddenly care?

But Yuigahama didn't seem particularly bothered, as she popped over to peek at the computer and read it out loud. "Um…"

Request for advice from alias yumiko ☆:
Sagami's being kinda annoying.

Now that's straight talk! A straight one-game match! Producer! Geez, talk about a head-on fight—are you Cure March or something?

Yuigahama smiled awkwardly at it, too. "Ah, ah-ha-ha… But this is kinda sorta not like Yumiko."

"You think? Seems typical for her." In fact, I get the impression she'd be fine with saying far worse.

"It's true; it doesn't seem like something she'd do." A dissenting opinion came from an unexpected source. When I requested an explanation with a look, Yukinoshita pushed her hair off her shoulders and replied, "She would usually say that to the person's face, wouldn't she?"

"Oh yeah. I guess that's true. You're like that, too."

"Please don't compare us." Yukinoshita looked away in sullen displeasure.

I feel like there's not much difference, but there clearly was to

her. She gave me a bit of a glare—guess she was more put off by the comparison than I thought. “Besides, I haven’t been saying much lately—since certain individuals aren’t at all affected by anything I say.”

“Ah-ha-ha, Hikki’s pretty hopeless, huh?” Yuigahama agreed with an exasperated smile.

But Yukinoshita sighed a little. “You too.”

“You’ve given up on me, too?!”

…You do *realize you’re still saying these things straight to our faces.*

Well, I’m not a fan of insulting someone to their face, myself. But man, Miura and Yukinoshita really are alike. They’re totally opposite in type, but maybe their fundamental nature is fairly similar. That’s exactly why they clash so hard.

Girls are complicated. As I was mulling over these thoughts and fiddling around aimlessly on the computer, I noticed the e-mail from Miura was longer than I thought. “There’s more here, guys.”

“Huh? Oh, you’re right.” Yuigahama also took a good look at the screen.

Yukinoshita prompted with her gaze for Yuigahama to read the rest.

She’s, like, depressed or something. She’s being a downer and making things awkward.

It’s annoying.

After listening to Yuigahama read it aloud, Yukinoshita folded her arms casually. “…In other words, she seems unhappy, and Miura is concerned?”

“I think so. This is kinda like Yumiko.” Yuigahama smiled warmly.

That smile even made me sorta feel like Miura might almost be a good person.

It was true now that I thought back on it. Even after Miura and Yuigahama’s confrontation in the classroom a while ago, and after Yuigahama had joined the Service Club’s side during the tennis match, Miura had continued to stay friends with her. I think that would typically be impossible. A grudge based on intra-caste factional conflicts will continue in perpetuity, and if things come to

a head, then afterward, whoever failed to seize power would have no choice but to leave. They'll associate with the next rank down, and if they can't even fit in there, then conventionally, they'll be forced to walk the path of the loner.

Why was Yuigahama still a member of the upper crust? Her own communication skills were part of it, of course. Maybe she was also receiving quiet support from Hayama, who hates conflict. But more than that, I believe the biggest factor is Miura's personality.

Tolerance is required of one who would be queen, particularly tolerance to avoid getting caught up in unimportant matters. From that angle, I can start to see the reason she reigns as queen.

…Which is why, actually, this e-mail was probably not out of kindness or anything—she must have her own complicated feelings about it: She finds it genuinely annoying, but she's also concerned, but it's annoying, and directly addressing it herself would be annoying. What the heck, that's so convoluted and annoying.

Yukinoshita, after a span of deep reflection, suddenly unfolded her arms and asked Yuigahama, "How has Sagami actually been?"

"Hmm, um, how should I put it…?" Yuigahama was evasive.

I finished for her. "Well, she is annoying. She's generally been acting fine, but it's like everyone else is tiptoeing around her. Or more like she's forcing everyone to be all careful around her…"

"That would be pretty obnoxious." Yukinoshita's expression was disapproving. And this was her reaction just to hearing about it. It was way more obnoxious for us, being in the same class as Sagami.

Everyone's caution around Sagami was probably the cause of the bad atmosphere.

"…The solution—," Yukinoshita began, but I cut her off.

"Oh, don't worry about that. It'll end soon enough."

Yukinoshita shot me a questioning look. "What do you mean?"

"The cultural festival only just ended, so this is just some of the lingering effects. It'll go back to normal eventually."

After a moment of silence, Yukinoshita slowly began to speak, probing. "By *lingering effects*, you mean the incident with you during the cultural festival?"

"Probably. You can tell by the class vibe."

Yuigahama pouted a little—she didn't agree or disagree. She simply looked a little unhappy. That reaction made me even more certain.

Sagami's clique really was spreading around half-truths about

me—about just how nasty and cruel Hachiman Hikigaya was.

It was like they were doing anti-Hikigaya lobbying, so to speak. I'm used to attacks of that nature, but it's still uncomfortable. I'd have rather they ignored me completely, but when they were right where I could see them, hovering and buzzing on about me like mosquitoes within my earshot, it was a little aggravating.

But the saving grace was that Miura also found that annoying. If you're going off my life philosophy, which is that the enemy of your enemy is your friend, that made Miura my ally in this. *No way, man, Miura's becoming my friend?! She's such a good person! So nice! I could start liking her! Not that I ever will!*

This secret gratitude toward Miura made me feel almost like her coconspirator. While I was processing that, I heard a shallow sigh next to me. "But those things feel bad, you know…? Nobody likes hearing all that mean stuff…"

Glancing over, I saw Yuigahama staring at the floor. I couldn't see her expression—I could only see her lightly squeezing the hem of her skirt.

"Yuigahama…" Yukinoshita said her name gently, matching Yuigahama's quiet tone.

That seemed to snap Yuigahama out of it, and she lifted her head with a jerk. "U-um! I mean, it sucks to hear people bad-mouthing anyone, you know?"

…Well, you know, she's a nice person. I'm not. "I enjoy hearing it, though."

"Then you're a jerk!" Yuigahama cried.

But Yukinoshita was calm. With a smile, and a little more slowly than usual, she said, "Hikigaya doesn't entertain himself with unkind gossip, though."

…*Oh, hey, could she be nice, too?* I was surprised at her unexpected defense.

It seemed Yuigahama shared my surprise. After a pause, she nodded. "Th-that's right. Hikki's rotten, but he's—"

She was swiftly cut off by an icy voice. "I mean, there's no one for him to gossip with."

"You're making me sad!" Yuigahama wailed tearfully.

Hey, I'm the sad one here, though? What the heck, my heart was almost warm for a second.

"But it's true, isn't it?" Yukinoshita smiled at me. A smile of ice to finish me off.

“You’re basically right, so I can’t say no…” Yeah, that’s all I got. Come on, how great a Hikigaya inspector is she?

I gave her a rather exasperated look, but instead of sparing a thought for my feelings, she cleared her throat lightly and moved the conversation along without so much as a by-your-leave. “At any rate, let’s learn a little more about Sagami and her friends’ behavior, as well as the situation within Class F, before we deal with this appropriately. I could speak directly with her, but that would likely just worsen things…”

It seemed Yukinoshita meant to take some sort of specific action in order to resolve this, but I didn’t see much point. “This kind of thing resolves itself if you let it be, so I don’t think we have to do anything. It’s functionally harmless.”

In my opinion, all the tiptoeing around Sagami was temporary. This fad was still going strong only because not much time had passed since the cultural festival. She was just looking for someone else to attack, someone more pathetic, to distract herself a little from her recent embarrassment. It would be foolish to do all that work over something that would come to an end anyway.

But it seemed Yukinoshita did not agree, and she looked me straight in the eye. “…It’s not harmless.”

“Y-yeah! It does suck when the vibe is bad in your class, right?” Yuigahama also hastily agreed.

If both of them were on board, then I couldn’t do anything. If that was the majority rule, I would be forced to go along with their decisions. “…Well, whatever,” I said grudgingly.

Yukinoshita nodded in satisfaction. “Well then, first, let’s see how Sagami and the others are doing and search for a solution.”

But despite her proposal, school was already over. Sagami and the rest would have gone home long ago. “There’s nothing we can do today,” I said.

“True… It’s about time to go, so let’s call it a day.”

We all stood from our chairs, tidying up our things and getting ready to go home.

The Service Club’s activities that day had been to brush off Ebina’s fantasies, to recommend Haruno maintain the current situation, and to figure out what to do about Miura’s e-mail, but we’d have to get to it later. That’s a lot of nothing. I’m almost proud of us.

As I was thinking, *Oh man, this club*, Yuigahama heaved her bag

over her shoulder with a spurt of enthusiasm. “Okay, let’s work hard on this tomorrow!”

Let’s work hard tomorrow. That’s a good line. I think it’s so wonderful, I’d like to say it every day.

2

We meet **Meguri Shiromeguri** once more.

The eyes say as much as the mouth—or so they say. But to be more precise, the eyes are way more loud and annoying than the mouth.

Class was over, and it was time for SHR, and then we'd be going home. In elementary schooler terms, this was the day-end circle. *SHR* as an acronym is frankly incomprehensible. When I first heard that term, I didn't think it meant 'short homeroom'; I thought it was like a race that went all across the North American continent or something.

I could feel people staring at me again today, and I glanced backward. Since normally nobody ever pays attention to me, I have a sixth sense for it like this. Wow, that's a sad habit.

Upon turning around, they were there. Girls from my class. *Whoa, am I suddenly popular or something?* I began to think, but of course that wasn't what was going on.

Their eyes, narrowed and curved like crescent moons, held contempt and scorn, and I looked away again. Then I heard a short, shrill laugh. The back of my neck stung with their looks of mixed hate and curiosity.

Those looks were not coming from the girls at the top, headed by Miura, but rather the clique ranked one below them. Their key figure was Minami Sagami, who had spent another day moping and sighing. *I'm so hurt; I feel so awful.*

Though it wasn't enough to call this a cause for dispute, there was a slight rift between myself and Sagami. Well, there's a rift between me and the majority of the people in the school, but this wasn't your average lack of connection. Our rift was born from pure emotion, from spite.

And it was the biggest pain in the butt.

If we'd been perfectly ignoring and not acknowledging one another, if we just had nothing to do with each other, then we could have maintained a constant distance on both ends with no eventual point of contact.

But once feelings have changed your positions, things are different. Even if you distance yourselves, you're bound to clash again, eventually.

If you hate someone so much that you don't want to get involved with them, then your best bet is ignoring the hell out of them. That form of ostracism is as natural as breathing: the ideal. There's a knack to hating someone.

Everyone started leaving their seats, ignoring the announcements coming from the homeroom teacher.

They all did their own things: Some immediately dashed out of the classroom, some started up a momentary conversation with those next to them, and some slowly got ready to go.

As for me, I stayed in the classroom, playing it cool and pretending I really did still have something to do so I could gather information about that e-mail from Miura.

Now that school was done, the place was smelling even more like teen spirit.

Of the crowd, the ones gathered at the back of the class—Hayama and Tobe, plus Miura's clique—were playing out that very standard cliché.

"Then I'm going to my club," said Yuigahama.

"Yeah, see ya. Oh, Yui. I'm going shopping on Saturday."

"Yeah, okay. I'll definitely come with. See ya," Yuigahama replied, skillfully completing Miura's statement.

Actually, Miura's invitation was pretty damn sucky… That's practically something I would do. Well, she's the queen, so that's how it goes. So wait, doesn't that mean I'm basically like a king? **With no clothes, though.*

Yuigahama waved casually at Miura and her friends, then left the classroom. She had to be heading to the clubroom. Watching her go, Miura seemed rather content. Apparently, Miura had accepted that Yuigahama was in a club. It seemed when you spelled out your intent clearly, Miura could be understanding, too. I had completed another lesson in the study of Miura.

Once Yuigahama was gone, Miura leaned against the wall like a

queen bee with Ebina at her side. Hayama's group also had to go to their club, so that was probably why they were already packed up and ready. After some chatting, they'd probably leave.

The classroom had one door at the front and one at the back. Inevitably, Hayama's group would be seen by anyone exiting from the back. The others in the class would exchange good-byes and maybe a few words of conversation with Hayama and Miura's group as they passed. *What is this, the daimyo paying their respects on the way out of Edo?*

But that sort of thing was just for those who were friendly with their clique. The ones who weren't particularly on close terms with them would disappear softly through the door at the front.

Yet another left the classroom. That was Kawa…saki? Yeah, it was probably Kawasaki. *What, does she have another after-school job or something?*

As she passed by me, Kawasaki suddenly accelerated into a brisk stride, then practically a jog. And then once she was a certain distance away, she returned to her usual languorous pace.

When she got to the door, she glanced back. Her eyes met with mine, and she made an *Urk!* expression as if her words were stuck in her throat, bowed her head an inch, and marched off abruptly.

Guess that was her version of a farewell. *What an idiot. Just say bye when you pass me.*

After Kawasaki left, I zoned out for a while. Then Sagami and her friends passed by at the front, probably using that door to avoid Miura and her friends. That fact made it obvious Sagami had a distaste for Miura.

That aversion really was rubbing Miura the wrong way. Just as it had been with Yuigahama, what pissed off Miura the most was a cagey attitude.

That observation was enough of a start. Basically, if Sagami started acting in a way that didn't irk Miura, then the problem would be resolved. The question would be how to accomplish that.

Well, the most effective strategy would probably be to run out the clock. In other words, they just had to leave each other alone until they wouldn't be in the same class anymore. *Or so I'd say, but since Yukinoshita wanted something done quickly, I guess we can't do that…*

Anyhow, as I ruminated over the information I'd just confirmed, I decided to head to the clubroom at a lazy stroll.

X X X

It was another peaceful teatime in the clubroom that day. At this rate, we'd be starting a band soon.

When I stepped into the room, the girls were already seated and leaning together in front of the computer. They were drinking black tea as they reached out for snacks, expressions pensive as they looked at the screen.

I sat down in my usual designated seat and sort of watched as they chatted about various things.

As far as I could tell, there was no tea for me, so I slurped on the hot, hot MAX Coffee I'd bought before coming to the clubroom.

This time of year, deep in fall and heading into winter, is the season of MAX Coffee. MAX Coffee is also great when spring has just passed and summer is approaching. In fact, MAX Coffee is great year-round.

The teatime snack that day was *nure-senbei*, a well-known souvenir from Choshi in Chiba. The official ones from the train stations in particular are probably the most famous. Chiba is known as a rice hot spot, and the prefecture is also a well-known producer of soy sauce. Chiba rice with soy sauce. Rice and soy sauce are the dreeeeeam (dream) collaboration. ☆

…Well, if you asked me *Does it go well with MAX Coffee?* I suspect I'd be compelled to reply …*I love Chiba, so!* with a brisk smile.

As I was licking my lips over Chiba specialties (abbreviated as licking Chiba), Yukinoshita folded her arms with a *hmm*. "Now then, what do we do?"

Yuigahama also sounded like she was deep in thought. "Ohhh, about this, huh?"

It seemed the aforementioned new activity—the Chiba Prefecture–Wide Advice E-mail—was causing concern for them.

Request for advice from alias Megu☆Megu:

I'm looking for ideas for making the sports festival more fun. Also, since this is my last year, I absolutely want my team to win!

Nibbling at my *nure-senbei*, I read the message and was a little

surprised.

…This is the first normal e-mail request for advice we've gotten. And, uh, my surprise at that kinda makes you wonder what's up with this club, huh?

"The sports festival…" Yukinoshita breathed a melancholy sigh.

"Ohhh, it's already that time, huh?" Now that I thought about it, in our day-end homeroom, I'd been put on the red team.

Lately, it seems a lot of sports festivals and athletic days are held in spring or early summer, but at our school, the sports festival is in fall. Once it's over, the season finally turns to winter. Though for us second-years, the school field trip is waiting right after that.

Either way, for students, the sports festival is a big event, and for those who celebrate their youth, it's an event they look forward to. For the jocks in particular, this is the time when they can show off their skills to the girls. *If I could pull off something cool, I could get a girlfriend, too…* is a delusion familiar to more than one or two boys.

But it seemed that many girls—Yukinoshita specifically—were not impressed by that, and her eyebrows came together in annoyance. "…I have never liked the class vs. class relays."

Ohhh, I remember that. They make you do that in middle school, huh? "Yeah, there's a pressure that's hard to describe." The memory brought back the emotions of the experience, and I agreed immediately.

Yuigahama nodded and added, "I'm not very fast, so it was tough."

"Yeah, yeah," I said, "and you get those guys who actually get mad and start swearing when someone passes his classmate, like Nagayama from soccer club…"

"Who's that?! Why are you naming people?!" Yuigahama's head jerked toward me in surprise.

You don't know Nagayama? He was in my class in middle school. Well, it'd be scary if you did know him. Geez, I hated that guy, but he probably hated me, too.

He wasn't the only thing I hated, though. Because of the term *class vs. class relay*, my folder of trauma is packed with gigs and gigs of data.

"And then there's the girls who hate taking the baton from me. Why do they go out of their way to be like *Eugh, no way…* in front of me? Is it a *tsundere* thing?" No matter which way you slice it, I'm

forced to assume they say it because they want my attention. Is this that thing where you bully someone because you like them? So what you're saying is this actually means I'm super-popular. Or not.

When I started smiling at my own misfortune, Yuigahama gave another awkward laugh. "Ta-ha-ha… No, that's…"

Ngh, that hint of pity in her gaze hurts… Sometimes kindness and consideration can be painful.

"I think he understands, so I'll make no comment. Just that when a girl is acting as if she hates you, odds favor the possibility that she truly does hate you."

You know, Miss Yukinoshita—harsh realities can be hard to accept when they're just thrown in your face. Were you aware? "You did just comment. Look up the meaning of *comment*. Also, if we're talking about sports festivals, then you know…"

"He's got more…" When I tried to continue, Yuigahama smiled a little stiffly.

You fool, of course I have plenty of memories of sports festivals. "I do. I think this is just something boys do, but when you're doing gymnastic formations, if you're short one, then you do it with the teacher—when you don't even have enough to do the fan."

I had about eighty thousand mental Hachimans in my brain agreeing with me like, *Yeah, yeah*, but this must not have rung a bell for either of the girls, as they were giving me blank looks. Girls don't do gymnastics formations, so I guess they don't get it…

"But anyway," I continued, "for group exercises, and not just the fan, I generally got partnered with the teacher. And thanks to that, I was constantly getting people staring at me on sports days."

"I feel sorry for your parents for seeing that…" Yukinoshita rubbed her temple with a sour look.

Thank you for being considerate of my parents, but you don't need to worry. The sight had actually made my parents burst out laughing, and then they completely forgot about me, occupying themselves with taking pictures of Komachi. This is what it's like, being a big brother…

I sighed at myself with a self-deprecating *phew*. About when all this nostalgia started to get me down, though, I heard a short, rhythmic *tap, tap*. It hadn't been that forceful, but in the quiet room, it was particularly audible.

We all looked toward the door.

"Come in," Yukinoshita called out, and a familiar girl came in.

“Pardon meee.” She had a fluffy, pleasant air about her, and with every turn of her head as she looked around the clubroom, her two braids trailed behind. Her braids were secured with hair clips, and the gleam of the sunset on her smooth, pretty forehead made me think of her bright, cheery personality shining through.

Meguri Shiromeguri. She’s a third-year, one year older than me, and the student council president at Soubu High School. Yukinoshita and I knew her from when we were on the Cultural Festival Committee.

When Meguri was done curiously gazing around the clubroom (“Ohhh!”), she gave us all a bright grin. “Um, this is the Service Club, right? I sent you an e-mail earlier asking for help with the sports festival, but I thought it would be best to ask you directly… so here I am,” she said, and our eyes all turned to the computer screen.

Megu☆Megu.

I get it. So the e-mail Meguri sent must have meant this. The part about the sports festival being her last also fit perfectly, too.

“So the one who sent this e-mail was…” When Yuigahama looked back and forth between the computer and the student council president, Meguri pointed to herself.

“Yep, I think that’s me,” she said, ambling up to us. “I want to make it just as exciting as the cultural festival was. Would it be possible to ask for your help, Yukinoshita, and…um…?” There, Meguri glanced over at me and got stuck, making a difficult *Uhhh* expression.

In an attempt to be subtle, Yuigahama muttered, “Hikigaya. It’s Hikigaya.”

When Meguri heard that, she clapped her hands. Then she threw a gentle smile at Yuigahama. “Oh, you’re Hikigaya, right. And…” Her bemused expression returned as she glanced at me.

Realizing she’d been misunderstood, Yuigahama hurriedly corrected her. “No! I-I’m Yuigahama! That’s Hikigaya.”

“Ohhh, I see.” Meguri nodded her understanding.

“Yeah… Um, if you call me, er, Hikigaya, or whatever, that’s, uh, embarrassing…” Yuigahama faced away, her voice getting quieter and quieter. You could hardly hear her at all anymore.

Yes, indeed, I'm also very embarrassed just hearing this, and I don't know at all how to react.

"A name you don't want to be called? Just like the emperor. As expected from Hikigaya…" Yukinoshita nodded, impressed.

Stop iiiit! No name-related teasing! And stop calling that guy Kondou "Condom"! With me, I just get called stuff like Hikki, but if you sit down and think about it, that's pretty mean, isn't it…?

"I'm sorry. I'm not very good at remembering names…," Meguri said with a despondent, apologetic slouch.

Yukinoshita added kindly (and matter-of-factly), "Don't worry. It's just that he's good at being forgettable."

"It's weird for you to say that, though? Not saying you're wrong, but…," I said. In fact, when people are calling for me, they most often go like *Um* or *Hey, you*, so I can't even know for sure if they remember my name or not.

"No harm, no foul, then, wouldn't you say? Plus, you're good at making yourself go unnoticed, too." Yukinoshita smiled brightly. I have no idea what she meant by *then*, and she even added a *plus* there, too. Still, I couldn't deny facts, however regrettable they were.

"Th-that's not true at all!"

But the denial came from an unexpected source as Yuigahama cut in between Yukinoshita and me. "He's all alone in the classroom, so he actually sticks out like a sore thumb!"

"Was that supposed to be a defense…?" That wasn't defending me at all. What's the point of driving me into a corner like this? Are you fishing now?

"Ah-ha!" Meguri suddenly laughed as she watched our exchange. Then she took a step toward me, closing the distance between us. "Hikigaya."

Hearing my name called from short range made my feet retreat a step. "Y-yes?" I replied.

Meguri nodded. "Hikigaya, huh? Okay, I've remembered it now. During the cultural festival, when we were short on people, you did a lot of good work for us, so I'll be counting on you."

When she smiled at me so innocently, her inability to remember my name felt like less of a big deal. I mean, it's normal for people to get my name wrong anyway.

More important, I was touched, if only slightly, that she'd remembered my efforts during the cultural festival.

But it was still also embarrassing.

Though our faces were at close range, it seemed Meguri wasn't bothered by such things, as her fluffy smile remained unchanged.

So I was the one to turn away. "Y-yeah… Well, I'll give it a shot…"

And as my gaze shifted, it landed on someone with a bit of a pout.

"Hmurg…"

What are you, a puffer fish? Did a predator show up?

Behind the grumpy Yuigahama, I heard a terribly cold voice. "Shiromeguri, I don't mind if you leave *that* be, so tell me more about your request, please."

It's gotten pretty chilly lately, huh…? Her tone really brought the seasonal weather inside.

At her remark, Meguri's eyes lit up with recognition, and she clapped her hands. "Oh yes! What I wanted to talk to all of you about was ideas for exciting events for everyone at the sports festival. Something that'll really wow the crowd, make their eyes pop!" Meguri stuck up her finger and began to explain.

"Eye-popping events…" In my head, I imagined a *youkai* that was just an eyeball running around yelling in a shrill voice. My hair just about stuck up to become an antenna.

These vague requests tend to give you silly fantasies like that. If I'm gonna make a comparison, it's kinda like when you're at your part-time job and you have nothing to do, and an older employee says, like, *Talk about something interesting*. But then when you do talk about something, he'll say, *Boring. Never mind*, you know? And if you say you don't have any interesting stories, then he'll be like, *You're so boring*. What do you want me to do? The guys who start those conversations are usually the boring ones.

Well, I don't think Meguri's that kind of person, but this discussion was a little lacking in specificity. I didn't really understand what we were supposed to do.

It seems I wasn't the only one thinking that, as Yuigahama raised her hand a bit, hesitantly. "What's that?"

Beside Yuigahama, Yukinoshita gently folded her arms. "Oh yes, what did we do last year…?"

"Oh, now that you mention it, I don't remember…" I tried digging through my memory, too, but nothing of the kind came up. I have a vague memory of spending the whole time sitting in my chair and zoning out. I think I was in some kind of competition, but I really don't remember.

The only thing I did remember was how the guys from the sports clubs had been saying stuff to each other like *It's such a drag to have to do a sports festival, even in high school, huh?* and *For real, man*, and then once the competition actually started, they got super into it and had a whole lot of fun. And on the way back, they'd given the girls high fives, too. Meanwhile, I'd just been staring at the girls' high socks.

When I failed to remember anything about the all-important attention-grabbing event, Yukinoshita offered me a pitying sigh. "They do say people suppress memories that are too painful…"

"Could you not treat old sports festivals like my dark past? I mean, if I could forget about it this easily, then there isn't any trauma there. Come on. And if you don't remember, either, then you're the same."

"Sometimes forgetting it is how you move on," she said with a smug look for some reason.

"Hey, why are you acting like that's some philosophical discovery? You're not saying anything wise here."

"Ah, ah-ha-ha… B-but I don't remember it well, either." Yuigahama joined in with us, trying to be nice.

But in your case, it's like—I think you just forget stuff.

Meguri's shoulders slumped listlessly when she realized all three of us had completely forgotten the big event of the previous year. "So you don't remember it after all… We had a "cosprace"… We raced in cosplay…"

A cosprace… That does sound familiar…, or so I thought, but was that *Comp Ace*?

I didn't remember after all. But I'm sure I observed it at the time, and I'm sure I was scowling at the popular kids chattering,

giggling, and squealing over each other's cosplays. I still feel that way, even now.

Even after having the event explained to them, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were both tilting their heads like, *Huh?*

Meguri smiled weakly. "I see," she muttered, and then she pulled herself together with renewed determination. "It's so boring every year, huh? That's why I wanted to do something big this time." She looked at us, eyes gentle, but also overflowing with spirit.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita must have been overwhelmed by her enthusiasm, both taking a step back.

"O-okay…"

"I understand. In that case, when do you need our ideas…?" Yukinoshita asked.

Meguri grabbed her hands. "About that, there is a Sports Festival Committee, so wouldn't you be able to consider it there?"

"What? Uh, I wouldn't mind, but, um, why did you…? Could you please…let go of my hands…?" Yukinoshita was stunned by the sudden attack of personal contact. Normally, she's all touchy-feely with Yuigahama, so I'd thought she'd be used to that, but it seemed that was not the case. I guess it's less that she's used to touchy-feely behavior and more that she's just used to Yuigahama.

Despite Yukinoshita's protests, Meguri made no move to withdraw her hands. In fact, she took another step closer. "The truth is, we still haven't picked a chair for the Sports Festival Committee… So, Yukinoshita, could you?"

With Meguri's intent gaze on her, Yukinoshita's cheeks reddened, and she shrank back. But it seemed she did have just the slightest energy left to resist, as she gently withdrew her hands from Meguri's. "I decline."

"Oh, I thought so…" Meguri's head slumped listlessly in disappointment, but she didn't push any further, backing down completely.

But then her eyes flashed, and next she turned to Yuigahama. "What about you, Yuigahama?!"

"Huh?!" With the offer suddenly thrust toward her instead, Yuigahama leaped up, then waved her hands no at a super-high speed. "Huh? Huh? I—I can't!"

"Yeah, huh… I couldn't just bring this up out of the blue, huh…?" Meguri's shoulders dropped, and she smiled weakly.

Yuigahama drooped a little, too, pained by her disappointment. “I’m sorry…”

“No, don’t worry about it. I was just thinking I’d be glad if you would take it on for me. Thanks for your concern,” Meguri said, gently stroking Yuigahama’s head. The sudden gesture startled Yuigahama, and she yelped a little. But Meguri ignored that and continued petting her.

But it was a pretty big problem if the committee chair wasn’t decided yet, at this stage. Wouldn’t that cause management difficulties?

It seemed Meguri, of course, also had a sense of the impending crisis. She drew her hand away from Yuigahama’s head and folded her arms with a *hmm*, leaning all the way over to the side as she closed her eyes. “But we can’t go without a chair, you know… Now that it’s come to this…”

Now that it’s come to this… I considered the matter, too, and that was when an idea struck me. Now that it had come to this, I mean, judging from the way this was going, wouldn’t the baton come around to me? *Since Yukinoshita and Yuigahama got asked, then naturally, I’d be next, right…? If she takes my hands or pets my head, I have zero confidence that I can refuse. This is bad, this is bad…*

I was trying to come up with a way to avoid this somehow, but before I could, Meguri came to her conclusion. “Now that it’s come to this, I’ve got no choice but to do my best and search for ideas,” she said with a nod-nod.

…H-huh? I’m right here! There’s someone here you haven’t asked yet! Look! Me! Me!

…What about me?

But of course, the call of my heart would not reach her. It seemed Meguri had already resolved the issue of the chair. Ngh…I wanted to have Meguri pet my head… Because, you know, I have a younger sister, but not an older one. So you just start wanting stuff like that, right…?

As I was mulling over the dregs of my desire, scattered in vain, I heard Yukinoshita mutter, “You haven’t decided on a chair…” I looked over to see she had her hand on her chin, considering. It appeared she had her own ideas about this. She jerked up her head abruptly to address Meguri. “Might anyone do that?”

The sudden question made Meguri blink. But she instantly understood what it meant, and she answered, “Huh? Well, we

couldn't have quite anyone. I was thinking it would be good to have someone reliable, someone I could entrust things to."

That line of reasoning implies I'm not reliable or someone you could entrust things to, though…

Well, they were entrusting the role of chair. So of course it'd be best for it to be someone of character. That being the case, it made sense that she wasn't addressing me.

But it seemed Yukinoshita's opinion differed, and she quietly shook her head. "No, I don't mean as an issue of character. I'm referring to their qualifications, or if there's a limitation to the organizations they're affiliated with."

It seemed they weren't quite talking about the same thing. After Yukinoshita restated the question, this time, Meguri caught what she intended. "Oh, is that what you mean? Then that's no problem. Actually, we did solicit for candidates. But there were no volunteers at all…"

"So you were looking for people? I had no idea." Yuigahama made a sound of casual surprise.

Meguri staggered a little with an *uuurk*.

Well, she was basically saying to her face that she'd heard zilch about all their efforts… The lack of malice in Yuigahama's surprise just made it worse.

Swaying like she was about to crumble, Meguri began a postmortem meeting with herself on the matter. "She didn't know, huh…? Of course… Maybe the problem was our method of notification… We did post bulletins, and we wrote it on the school website and distributed printouts and had the teachers tell people, and I updated my personal blog…"

Huh, I don't know anything about your blog, though. Is she an idol or something? Is she gonna dig a hole to bury herself in?

"Ah, um, I'm sorry! Er—I…don't look at that sort of thing at all! I don't know where the bulletin board is—Oh, but, but I'll be sure to look at it from now on! S-so…" Yuigahama was trying so hard to smooth things over.

But Meguri gently lifted one hand, stopping her from continuing. With a swipe at her eyes, she smiled. "It's okay, it's okay, Yuigahama. The problem was with how we got the word out. We'll also be using Twitter from now on."

"Dude, that's not the issue here." The remark left my mouth before I could stop it. *What a way to speak to your elders!* I thought,

but I was kind of getting the feeling it was okay to treat her like this.

Meguri didn't actually seem bothered, either. "Hey, we're starting to use LINE, too!"

Uh, like I said… I do think that positivity is very nice, but, uh…

"There's no need for that, Shiromeguri," Yukinoshita said, slightly exasperated. Then she lightly pressed her temple and breathed a short sigh.

"What do you mean?" Meguri cocked her head.

Yukinoshita replied to her question plainly. "There's one person suited to the job who I would recommend."

"Huh? Who, who? Tell me about them!" Meguri was deeply interested and enthusiastic.

For her part, Yukinoshita spoke slowly, as if gathering her thoughts. "Someone has experience in a similar position, is also fairly socially ambitious, and is fixated on jobs with status—and motivated, I would say."

"Yeah, yeah. That's good, someone with experience and motivation," Meguri interjected with enthusiasm, picking up on the parts that sounded good, but I couldn't share in her blithe excitement.

Someone who fit the description from Yukinoshita's hints rose to mind. I'm good at trivia. I'm so good that if you asked me how to spell "icup," I'd answer perfectly and get laughed at. Seriously, what the hell is with that culture?

This excellent brain of mine led me to the answer. And it was not a very good answer.

"Hey, Yukinoshita. Wait… You're not suggesting…?" I said to her.

She could tell that I'd figured it out, glancing over at me. Surreptitiously, she mouthed, "Correct."

Her lips are so shiny, I thought for a wasted second, but more importantly, disappointment and resignation just barely won over inside me. *Just barely?*

Yuigahama and Meguri still didn't get it. Seeing the exchange between me and Yukinoshita, they looked confused. But once they heard the answer, they'd probably react the same as I did. Just without the shiny lips part.

"Tell me, Yukinoshita," Meguri insisted.

Yukinoshita turned back to her. "From Class 2-F, the chair of

the Cultural Festival Committee, Minami Sagami."

"What?!" Yuigahama was the one to cry out in surprise. She never saw it coming, I guess.

Meguri was also surprised, but her expression gradually chilled. "Ohhh yeah. I—I see…but I don't know…"

While Meguri struggled to say anything at all, I decided to question Yukinoshita's motives in her stead. "What are you playing at, Yukinoshita?"

"It's just the same as overcoming trauma. When you lose something, the only way you can make up for it is with something of equal or greater value. Am I wrong?" she said, and that made sense to me. Yeah, she's the type of person who would shove someone who can't swim into the pool and call it practice.

In other words, she meant that through making Sagami the chair for this sports festival, she'd regain her confidence and possibly improve her reputation with others.

If this went well, we'd be able to fulfill Sagami's desire for recognition, and her frustration would be no more.

And thanks to a chain reaction, the awkward atmosphere of Class 2-F would be slightly improved, too, since the main cause of said atmosphere was Sagami. Well, I can't deny my presence had also been making things worse.

"But is it worth going that far? It's just Class F…"

"It is," Yukinoshita cut me off sharply. I could sense her strong will in the severe look she turned my way.

Well, if she was that determined, it'd be difficult to convince her otherwise. Difficult and a headache. Besides, it wasn't like Yukinoshita's explanation wasn't convincing. She had a fair point.

But all she'd managed to convince me of was her reason for recommending Sagami—or I would say, why you'd recommend her if Sagami was your main focus. The problem was, what if you considered the role of chair to be your main focus?

And that was the area where it seemed Meguri could not agree. "Hmm, Sagami, huh…?" she muttered with a grim look.

Then Yukinoshita chimed in to reinforce her proposal. "I believe giving second chances is an important part of helping people grow."

"That's right, yeah. I think so, too." In response to Yukinoshita's opinion, Meguri closed her eyes and gave a big nod. "But it is a real job, so we'll be in trouble if she doesn't put her all into it." Her eyes

were saying, *We can't let her do something like last time with the cultural festival*. Her attitude was gentle, yet also firm. That was different from the usual fluffy and rather absentminded vibe she usually had. She had the gravity of a student council president.

"…" Though it wasn't enough to call intimidating, Meguri's serious look made Yukinoshita go silent.

It was true that, as Meguri said, Sagami had a poor record. Her sabotage and abandonment of responsibility during the cultural festival was not acceptable behavior in a leader.

"I don't agree, either," I said.

People don't change that easily. If they could change based on words of gratitude, kind compassion, or cheap expressions of determination, then the world would be overflowing with transforming superheroes.

Though I can't say for certain, I doubt Sagami has grown as a person through her failure during the cultural festival. If she had, then she wouldn't have been so hostile to me, for one thing, and she wouldn't be forcing others to sympathize with her.

People don't really change. But if they can, there's only one way to go about it: to get hurt through bad experiences over and over again until wounds are indelibly carved into your heart—and then it's just that the impossibility of escaping that pain leads to changed behavior.

Sagami has still not reached that territory. Therefore, we should not leave the position of chair to Sagami.

"I wonder about Sagamin… If things wound up like before…"

Yuigahama's worries were well-founded. I figured we could expect a similar outcome.

"That won't happen. I won't let it happen," Yukinoshita declared, full of confidence.

But from where I stood, I sensed something dangerous in Yukinoshita's confidence. "Don't be stupid. If we end up with another cultural festival, then there's no point. Are you gonna work until you drop like last time?" I said.

Yukinoshita's mouth hung open and froze there.

"…What?" I asked.

"Ah, oh, nothing… I was just a little surprised," she muttered quietly, and then she blushed and cleared her throat with embarrassment. "Your worries are unfounded. The sports festival is a closed event, and the schedule is only one day. That makes it a

smaller workload than the cultural festival, so there would be less for me to do. I think it should be manageable enough for Sagami," Yukinoshita explained eloquently.

Yuigahama and I offered *uh-huh*s as we listened. But then Yuigahama froze. "But, like, that's assuming you'll be handling everything perfectly, Yukinon."

Before Yuigahama's glare, Yukinoshita was struggling to find a reply. "Yuigahama…but there is the matter of the request, and the e-mail from Miura…" The sudden introduction of these other topics kind of sounded like she was making excuses.

Yuigahama groaned a low *murghhh* before sighing in exasperation. "Agh…" Then she jerked her face up and smiled at Yukinoshita. "I'll help, too. This time, be sure to rely on me, okay?"

"Yuigahama…," Yukinoshita murmured, obviously relieved. "Thank you…"

"Hey, it's totally fine." Yuigahama took a step toward Yukinoshita and came up beside her. She gently took her hand, and they felt each other's warmth. How beautiful it is to have good friends.

I was completely left out of this, gazing from a distance upon this friendship that you could mistake for something more.

Meguri, the other one watching, sighed. "If you're going to help, Yukinoshita, then maybe it would be all right…"

She sounded relieved. But it could also be said that trust was what had given rise to the cultural festival fiasco.

"I'm not so sure about that. It's not like she's perfect, either, so I don't think you should overestimate her abilities." With that casual objection, I gave Meguri a look.

Meguri responded with a smile. "I think it'll be okay. Yuigahama will be with her, too."

True. If you have an encouraging motivator right in your face, of course you can worry less. Yuigahama was sure to be with Yukinoshita this time, supporting her through the whole thing, so Yukinoshita wouldn't make herself sick again. And if Yukinoshita was in top shape, she should be able to move the sports festival along without a hitch.

"…Well, I guess so," I answered.

Then Meguri leaned in close to my ear and added softly, like she was letting me in on a secret, "Besides, you'll be with her, too, right?" Her voice tickled my ear. The sensation and sweet scent

made me freeze up, and Meguri darted away again. With a gentle smile, she awaited my answer.

"…Well, it is my job." Unable to look her straight in the eye, I turned my gaze out the window. But I could hear her laughing pleasantly.

"Okay! Then it's settled!" She clapped twice, and once she'd gathered all eyes on her, she declared in a sonorous voice, "Let's try asking Sagami about this. Maybe Yukinoshita and I should talk to her?" she suggested.

"Yes, let's go tomorrow." Yukinoshita nodded. *But Yukinoshita doesn't have the personality for that…*

"I-I'll go, too!" Yuigahama insisted.

Making up for that deficiency would be, well, Yuigahama's job, I guess. Yeah, there should be no problem this way.

"Okay, I'll see you again tomorrow. Thanks!" Meguri said, turning around. But right when she was about to leave the room, she gave a cry ("Ah!") like she remembered something and whirled back around with a swish of her skirt. "By the way, what team are all of you? In this school, all the classes get divided in half, right? I just wanted to check—I'm on the red team."

That reminded me that in the request e-mail from Meguri, it had also said she wanted to win, because it was her last year. That had to be why she wanted to know.

What team you were on wasn't exactly classified information, so I answered first.

"Red," I said, then glanced over at Yuigahama.

"Red." Yuigahama looked at Yukinoshita.

"Red." Yukinoshita looked at Meguri.

The chain of red team declarations was done just like roll call. Apparently satisfied, Meguri clenched an enthusiastic fist. "Same as me. Great! Then let's all aim for victory and do our best! Whoo!"

We were all unable to keep up with her sudden and bold statement of excitement, exchanging looks with each other. *Why is she so into this…?*

When we failed to reply, Meguri pumped her fist again. "Let's do our best! Whoo!"

…Ah! O-oh crap, I know what this is. It's the same as the king in Uptaten Towers in DQV*, or the lady presenter in a* sentai *stage show. You have to answer here, or you'll get stuck in a never-ending loop.*

It seemed Yuigahama had also felt the same vibe, as she

immediately gave me a look.

"Y-yeah…" This really was a little embarrassing, so I raised a hesitant hand like a lucky cat waving in response.

This satisfied Meguri, and she finally left the clubroom.

…I dunno, man. Just, what?

3

Just as he figured, **Minami Sagami** hasn't changed.

The day after Meguri visited the clubroom, I was in there alone after classes had ended, while the others were out.

The window was open a crack to let in the refreshing autumn wind. The room was peacefully silent; only the quiet ticking of the second hand of the clock and the slight rustling of my paperback made any noise.

With no intrusive sounds and a chillier temperature than usual, my reading pace moved quickly. As I read along the lines and spaces of text, I got really into it, and before I knew it, I'd arrived at the last page of my current book.

When I was done, I found myself yawning with satisfaction and comfort.

About thirty minutes had passed since I'd come there.

Were they struggling in negotiations with Sagami? I stood, thinking maybe I'd go check on them, when from beyond the door and down the hall, I faintly heard some voices.

The door rattled loudly as someone yanked it open.

"Aaagh. That was sooo exhausting."

"…Indeed."

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita came in, complaining.

"Thanks for taking care of that," I called out to them, and the girls just nodded and gave short sighs.

Yeah, you seem super tired and stressed. I wonder if your stress will depress me, too, unless we address the mess with some finesse. The atmosphere of a scene is important.

Behind the two of them, a fluffy aura entered the room. "Thank you. And thank you for everything, too, Hikigaya!" Unlike the other

girls, Meguri was smiling brightly. It seemed she'd accompanied them after their negotiation with Sagami.

Oh, her smile and kind words are so soothing.

This is it; people at the top should be more like her. They should never even by accident put pressure on a subordinate who's trying to leave with comments like, *Huh? You're already leaving?* If Meguri were to say that, it'd come off much softer, like *You're already leaving…? I'd like to be with you a little longer…* I think I'd gladly do overtime then. I can really imagine it all, here. I could even see myself getting the wrong idea and confessing to her and getting gently turned down with a very kind smile, and then I'd have to leave. The rate of love confession of bland boys to gently fluffy girls is abnormally high.

As I was wavering on the boundary line between a soothing time and traumatic time, Yukinoshita's voice came in like a cold shower. "Shiromeguri, he hasn't contributed anything, so your consideration is unnecessary."

Yes, I haven't done any work.

"Yukinon, that was just a greeting."

Of course, Miss Yuigahama! I understood that! But there's no need to go out of your way to say so! And why bother saying that to Yukinoshita?

But, well, there was something else I had to worry about. "So how did things go with Sagami?" I asked.

Yuigahama's shoulders slumped, her expression weary. "It was pretty rough… Sagamin really seemed like she didn't want to do it, but I said a bunch of stuff…"

"Stuff, huh?" I repeated, sensing there was more behind that word.

Yuigahama nodded. "Yeah, you know, I was like, 'Let's all lick up this project together,' sorta thing."

I think she probably just wants to say lick…

I was capable of translating Yuigahama's Japanese now, but Meguri was tilting her head like, *Hmm?*

"Oh, they'll be doing some bootlicking, so she's not far off, I'd say." Yukinoshita swiftly backed me up there.

Uh, no, Yuigahama meant something completely different…

"You've been soft on Yuigahama lately, huh?" I said. *Is the world actually that* yuri-*licious? Is this Houbunsha? Is this* Manga Time *something-or-other?*

Yukinoshita gave me a blank look then, as if she didn't understand what I was talking about. "Not at all; this is normal."

"Is that right?"

When I gave her a look that said, *That's bull*, Yukinoshita sadly lowered her gaze. "…I'm sorry. Since you don't engage with people normally, you wouldn't know, would you, Hikigaya? This is what normal is. You should remember it."

Oh, it is? What a peaceful world we live in.

Well, whatever. The issue to be dealing with here was not Yuigahama and Yukinoshita's blossoming relationship, and also not the horribleness of how Yukinoshita normally treats me or the issue of my human rights. It was whether Sagami had accepted the role of chair or not. "So what's the verdict?" I asked.

With a particularly cool look, Yukinoshita answered, "She did accept, more or less."

"More or less?" That deliberately chosen phrase gave me some doubts.

Yukinoshita breathed a short, somewhat resigned sigh, turning her gaze out the window. "Yes. Though it feels more accurate to say that it was because Hayama asked her and not because of anything we said."

"You used Hayama, huh? Smart."

Hayama is someone Sagami admires, so a request from him would win more points with her than Yukinoshita or Yuigahama. Times like these, Hayama was a convenient card to play.

But it was quite unusual for Yukinoshita to actively rely on him. *Is there gonna be a typhoon coming tomorrow to stop the Keiyo Line, too?*

As I was pondering this, Yuigahama added, "But it felt more like Hayama intervened because he couldn't stand doing nothing."

Oh, I could imagine him doing that. I could imagine Sagami lighting up a little and saying like, *I can't do thaaat* as she accepted… People don't change that easily at their core.

"Well, she did accept it," Meguri said, trying to mediate.

Fair enough. As long as you got results, it didn't matter how you got there. Basically, progress had been made, or some groundwork laid to that end, in picking a chair and improving the atmosphere in Class 2-F. I hoped everything would go well now, but… But I was sure that wouldn't happen…

I felt like I was gonna sigh a bit, but Meguri stopped me short

as she continued, “So then, if we could cut right to it… Let’s go.”

“Go where?” Yuigahama asked.

Meguri grinned brightly. “We’re going to have a meeting for the committee now.”

A meeting… Urk… I don’t like that word…

But I could never resist that smile. And Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were both nodding and standing up, too…

Now that it had come to this, I’d have to join the meeting, too. Resigning myself, I stood from my seat and left the clubroom.

X X X

The room where the Sports Festival Committee was convening was the same as the one that had been used for the cultural festival. Back then, this was a place I’d visited every day.

Coming there for the first time in quite a while, I was struck by how tidy the meeting room was, and there was no sign of anything from back when we’d prepared for the cultural festival.

There was already a smattering of members from the Sports Festival Committee. Most of them were from student council. In fact, they composed the core of the committee.

“Hi, guyyys.” When Meguri addressed them, the student council members bowed and then slid to the sides, opening a path for her.

What’s going on here—are they ninjas or something?

Aside from the student council people, there were also students in gym uniforms. Judging from their physiques and general behavior, I guessed they were from sports clubs.

As I was wondering why they were there, Meguri whispered into my ear, “All the athletic clubs have sent people to help on the day of the event. Since, of course, we alone wouldn’t be able to manage all the personnel and handle all the setup.”

Oh, I see… Though they were calling this the “committee,” functionally speaking, it appeared to be made up of the student council and us, plus volunteer help like Sagami.

Basically, within the committee, there were the executives, and then there was the crew. And since we’d be the ones putting forth ideas and doing the planning and organization, that meant we were on the executive side.

Among the crew, there was someone I'd seen somewhere before, too.

She remembered me, too, I think; when her eyes met mine, she whispered something to the girl beside her, who also looked familiar. She was in a tracksuit, and the thing sitting next to her desk was probably a bag for basketball shoes. Was she from the basketball club?

But where have I seen them before…? I thought, searching my memory, but nothing quite hit. Well, I can't be expected to remember an obvious NPC like her.

People need to leave a strong impression to stick in your memory. And for that, you need to, like, flash some black lace panties or something, like Kawa-something! Kawa-something leaves a real strong impression!

Ignoring Nobodina and Nobodette for the moment, I headed for the front of the meeting room, where Meguri was waving me over. At the very front was a woman flipping through sheets of paper. She uncrossed and recrossed her legs beneath her white coat.

"Miss Hiratsuka…," I said dully. *Of course she's here…*

At my voice, the teacher noticed us and turned around. "Oh, it looks like you've managed to secure some personnel." Seeing us behind Meguri, she grinned.

Meguri responded to her smile with one of her own. "Yes, it was a good idea to do as you suggested, Miss Hiratsuka."

"You were behind this, too, huh…?" I glared at our club advisor.

She gave an amused chuckle-snort. "I was starting to get tired of the same sports festivals every year. I'm sure you'll make it interesting."

"She's just playing around, huh…?" Yuigahama said wearily in response to the too-honest admission.

Well, repeating the same event year after year will make you sick of it. Just how many sports festivals has she done, eh?

Miss Hiratsuka looked pretty excited for someone who had done this so many times already, and Yukinoshita noticed. She nodded as she asked to confirm, "Then will you be in charge of the sports festival as well, Miss Hiratsuka?"

"Basically. This kind of work gets passed to the young ones. You know—because I'm a young one. Yep."

She said it twice because it's that important, huh…?

She seemed so happy about it that none of us could say anything. We felt so bad for her. *Come on, someone marry her already! Let her find happiness while she's actually still young!*

Miss Hiratsuka must have noticed the sorrow in our silence, as she cleared her throat to cover the awkwardness. "By the way, how are things going with the committee? Have you made a decision?" she asked.

Meguri smiled vaguely. "Yukinoshita refused…but she recommended someone else, and we've asked that person."

"Oh-ho, a recommendation…" Miss Hiratsuka narrowed her eyes for a dubious instant and watched Meguri expectantly.

Meguri nodded. "Yes, it sounds like we're getting Sagami to do it."

"Sagami? Hmm, I see…" Miss Hiratsuka folded her arms pensively. "Well, if that's what you kids have decided, I'm fine with that. So where is the chair now, then? I don't see her…" Miss Hiratsuka casually leaned back, seemingly to search behind us, but there was no point when Sagami wasn't there.

Which reminds me, why isn't Sagami here? I don't really care, though.

Figuring I might as well ask, I looked at Yukinoshita. Without hesitation, she answered, "Sagami will be coming later."

"I see… Well then, once Sagami comes, let's start the meeting," Miss Hiratsuka said, and then she looked over at the door.

We shifted our attention there, too—at the silent, stationary door.

X X X

Some time had passed since we'd come to the meeting room. Murmurs would spread and a few people would pointedly clear their throats, and then silence would fall before the quiet chatter started up again. Over and over.

I glanced at the wall clock, but it was already past time for the meeting to start.

The reason the meeting still had yet to begin was because Sagami was late.

Well, if she was late by five or ten minutes, then it'd be no big

deal. That was common enough. We might think, *Eh, I guess she was a little late*, and then all would be forgiven. But when it's fifteen minutes, you really feel like now, you're fully late. Some part-time jobs will carry out attendance management in units of fifteen minutes, after all.

Unsurprisingly, everyone was shooting looks over at the executives that said, *Still?*

We had no choice but to wait. Yuigahama had texted and called her, but she had received no response. She breathed a tired sigh. That sigh spread through the whole meeting room. Sagami's continued absence was slowly fostering an air of hesitation around us.

I leaned over to Yuigahama and Yukinoshita, beside me, and whispered, "Shouldn't someone go get Sagami soon? Or go look for her or something?"

"Yes, true…," Yukinoshita muttered as she also glanced at the clock.

"Oh, then I could go…" Yuigahama was just standing up when the door slid open with a loud rattle, and everyone turned to look at once.

"Sorry I'm laaate!" Sagami waltzed in without really acting guilty about it at all and headed for a seat at the front uninvited. It seemed she had no doubts that was where she would be sitting. She even waved at a couple people on the way; I guess she knew them already. "Oh, hiya!"

Wondering who those people were, I saw they were Nobodina and Nobodette.

"Haruka! Yukko! You're on the committee, too! It's good to see you again~."

"…Yeah, looking forward to this." Though a little tense, the two of them waved back to her.

Hearing those names, I managed to remember. Nobodina and Nobodette were the girls who'd been with Sagami during the cultural festival. They must have been sent to help with the sports festival because they were in the basketball club.

Having found some friends seemed to put Sagami at ease, as she got even cockier.

It was true we'd been the ones to ask her to be committee chair. And being that she'd come here on our request, it was easy to anticipate she would have a relatively superior position. But still,

we executives were the only ones who knew that, and that had nothing to do with everyone else present. They were giving Sagami rather irritated looks.

When Sagami sat down, she noticed their looks and flinched a little. “Um, pardon me… I’m Minami Sagami, and I’m the committee chair,” she said hesitantly, bobbing her head in a bow.

Anyway.

Now that we were in fact beginning, Miss Hiratsuka, who occupied the front corner, looked around the whole room. “Right then, Shiromeguri—let’s begin.”

Thus acknowledged, Meguri nodded and announced most fluffily, “Yes, Miss Hiratsuka. Well then, we’re beginning the meeting. Sagami?”

“R-right.” I could hear the tension in Sagami’s voice at suddenly getting called on.

“Why don’t you and I lead the meeting together today? You can handle things on your own starting next time.”

Good call. If Meguri were to suddenly turn the leadership of the meeting over to Sagami in this situation, I doubt she could have managed it. She’d probably drop the ball just like she had with the cultural festival. Rather than leaving things to Sagami from the start and exhausting all of us, it’d be better for Meguri to help her with the first time to nail down the important items. It seemed she’d carefully considered what had happened the last time.

Meguri briskly stood and headed for the whiteboard, and one of the student council members followed. Standing beside the whiteboard, the student council member briskly held up a pen for her.

“Righty then, our agenda for today is to come up with a big event for the sports festival,” Meguri declared, accepting the pen from the student council member, and she began to write the agenda on the whiteboard in rounded and cute letters.

She tapped the board. “Throw your ideas at us! Anyone with something to say, raise your hand!” Meguri looked around the room, but everyone looked at each other and said nothing.

In the silence, Yuigahama’s hand shot up.

“Yes, Yuigahama!”

At times like these, the ability of the first person to offer a proposal will affect how active the meeting is later. No matter what her idea is, what’s important is to get the ball rolling. In fact, the

dumber the statement the better.

On that point, one might say Yuigahama was our ace batter. Just what you'd expect from a bimbo (*I kid; she's not*) who's good at reading the atmosphere and worrying about what people think. Using her social skills to get us out of this was pretty sharp of her.

But before I could be too impressed, I looked over at her and saw her muttering "That'd be good, too, but maybe this…" like she was just having fun, and you know, it seemed she was only thinking about how she wanted to have fun.

Well, of course! She's not the type to be thinking that deeply about strategy at a meeting like this, right?

I could almost hear her thoughts (*I'd like to do that, but I'd also like to do this; there's just so much I wanna do!*) as Yuigahama bounded out of her seat and called out, "What about a club vs. club relay?!"

"Then people who aren't in clubs would complain about not being able to participate, so we need to consider that…," Miss Hiratsuka muttered immediately.

There was a squeak as a line was drawn through *club vs. club relay* on the whiteboard.

It seemed we had an instant no. *I don't get it…*

Yuigahama dejectedly sat down. When she tilted her head as if this didn't quite make sense to her, Yukinoshita gave her shoulder a consoling pat.

"Keep 'em coming, okay?!" Meguri said with even more cheer.

This time, Yukinoshita quietly raised her hand.

"Yes, Yukinoshita!" Meguri pointed at her.

Yukinoshita answered coolly, "A scavenger hunt with random items from the students."

"Using personal belongings often leads to trouble. Things are lost; things get damaged…," Miss Hiratsuka said without missing a beat. There'd probably been an incident like that in the past. Something unpleasant must have happened, as her expression was rather dark. I wonder if she'd been in charge of that matter…

"Hmm, I see…," Meguri said, pen squeaking as she drew a line over *scavenger hunt* on the whiteboard. Her face clouded slightly as she took another look at the two failed ideas. But she quickly psyched herself up again, calling out with extra energy, "Don't get discouraged—let's work at this! Next!"

Now everyone was feeling timid, and they weren't raising their

hands. But Yuigahama wasn't going with the crowd that day. Once again, she thrust her hand up with an "Ohhh!"

"Yes, Yuigahama!" Meguri responded, calling her name with bright cheer.

"A bread-eating contest!" she suggested.

But yet again, Miss Hiratsuka muttered, "Choking incidents are pretty common… And people quickly start griping about wasting food…"

This is what people call *risk management*. You might also call it autoregulation. The result was *bread-eating contest* had a line drawn over it with a squeak.

Looking between the whiteboard and the teacher, Yukinoshita said with exasperation, "So many concerns…"

"They're really finicky about these things lately… There's tons of regulations about everything," Miss Hiratsuka replied, and even she sounded fed up.

Ahhh, so if Miss Hiratsuka were to allow something risky here, then she'd get all sorts of complaints from higher-ups and parental guardians, huh…? Middle management's a tough job.

As the enthusiasm of the whole room began to wane, Meguri still did her best to act cheerful nevertheless. "Anyway, let's try thinking up something! Everyone else, you keep your ideas coming, too!"

Meguri's efforts seemed to inspire, as Yuigahama, Yukinoshita, and the student council all offered their ideas.

They were rolling in now—one after another.

But despite the flow of ideas, opposition popped up every time from somewhere else and crushed them. The whiteboard was a disaster scene.

Eating contest
Ball toss (wink, wink)
Ball rolling (wink, wink)
Decathlon
Decameron
Botticelli
Chim Chim Cher-ee
Ooka is a cherry

All of them had a line drawn over them with a squeak.

At some point, it had turned into a sort of word association game. *Can't we just call this magical banana? Also, please stop talking*

badly about Ooka just because he's a virgin! There's nothing wrong with that!

But at this rate, I feel like the meeting is gonna end without us deciding anything…

If I were to offer something now, it'd probably get shot down, just like all the other ideas. There's a flow to meetings; when the reception of ideas has been positive, it's easy for new ideas and proposals to be accepted, but when it's negative, no matter how great an idea is, it'll get rejected or deferred.

Humans are social animals, creatures that will conform to social atmosphere and environment. They'll be swallowed up by the waves, swept away in the crowds and change. That was why no one tried to oppose that flow.

Going against the current means making waves. Unless you're someone like me with a firm, unyielding, steel will—like a lone island protected by a rock-hard concrete dam—you can't oppose the flow.

People who don't get that will be continuously worn down.

"Ideas, please, guys!" said Sagami, as one of those in charge of proceedings. She didn't say it very loudly. It was her job to guide the meeting, but since Meguri was handling most of it, I doubt many people were paying attention to Sagami.

But still, some people were looking at her.

Familiar voices are more easily noticed. Perceptions are not formed merely by physical senses; they manifest through connection to the object. Therefore, the more familiar a member of this meeting was with Sagami, the more they'd truly hear and understand that this was an irresponsible statement made by someone who didn't really care in a meeting that was starting to drag.

Sagami… Telling people Give me ideas, ideas, and more ideas *when she isn't doing anything at all… Is she our boss or what?!*

On the other hand, I wasn't offering any ideas, either. In other words: I'm a boss.

I think I'm sure to be an important person one day, but out of an abundance of concern for any underlings working for me as their boss, I've decided to absolutely never get a job. I'm not gonna do it; I'm never gonna get a job. Get a job, and you lose.

Left with nothing to do but strengthen my determination to be unemployed, I quietly turned my gaze out the window.

X X X

Outside, the setting sun was sparkling. Fall had deepened, and the days were getting shorter.

I guess as the days get shorter, so does your attention span. At some point, the vibe in the meeting room had reached rock bottom. The long meeting had exhausted all of us. People were bored and fiddling with their phones, zoning out with hollow-eyed looks, and fanning themselves with printouts. Everyone in the committee looked positively grumpy.

"Urk… If there are any other ideas, p-please… Aren't there any more…?" Meguri asked, sounding tired, but the response of the room was dull.

"Anything eeelse?" Sagami tried to follow up, but to no avail. As the two leaders of this meeting called out brokenly, Miss Hiratsuka, the supervising teacher, maintained her silence. And she was also maintaining her virtue, too. So prudish!

Perhaps my rude thoughts reached her, though. Miss Hiratsuka had kept her eyes closed and arms folded, but then she opened one eye and glanced over at me. Then with a jab of her jaw, she gave me a signal. Guess she wanted me to do something about this.

I couldn't help but sigh. "Agh… This isn't going anywhere…"

The one to speak next was Yukinoshita. Pressing her temple, she exhaled with similar fatigue. "Yes, the ideas here are weaker than I expected…"

"And even when we come up with something, there are more people shooting it down…" Yuigahama had made multiple suggestions, but each time, she'd been hit with rejection after rejection.

The both of them were already in resignation mode. Not Nekomimi Mode.

Since this meeting was flowing the wrong way, even if we were to proactively propose things, it wouldn't have much effect. This unproductive conference should be wrapped up quickly.

"You can't expect us to come up with anything now. This is a waste of time," I grumbled.

"What do we do, then?" Yuigahama asked, and I considered with a *hmm*.

We couldn't get anything done. Someone else who could should

be the one to make suggestions. And even if they couldn't do it, they might figure out what to do just by being forced to try. When you think about it, someone other than us really should be doing it after all. Just like Shinran, in the spirit of *Let a higher power support you*, let's expect someone else to save us. I'm so Buddhist, man. Well, not like Shinran meant that when he said that.

"It's like, you know how they say, 'The right person in the right place'?" I quoted that very wonderful, pithy saying.

Yukinoshita nodded with an *mm-hmm*. "It's true; that's a valuable way of thinking…"

Yeah, yeah, it totally is.

At a part-time job or anywhere, if you show people you're capable of handling something, next you'll be getting all that kind of work thrown at you. It's like how at my convenience store job, the girl who could kinda draw was forced to make signs every time. The boss would say something like *You're good at drawing, so you can write one up fast, right? Thanks*. People need to consider a little bit that even if you *can* do it, maybe you don't *want* to.

With this past experience in mind, the words spilled out of my mouth. "Well, typically speaking, an organization will use up talented people and then spit them out. And the job never even makes you much money anyway, which makes working at all seem pretty stupid."

"I feel that. I feel that!"

When I turned toward that sudden cry, there was Miss Hiratsuka slapping her knee hard and nodding with profound understanding.

"Miss Hiratsuka… I'm not sure you should be sympathizing here…" While the other kids were giving Miss Hiratsuka pitying looks, Yukinoshita pierced her with a chilly gaze.

It's great that she can just say what's right. My eyes are blurring with tears right now; I can't see in front of me… Someone needs to marry her soon, or I might seriously get a job and support her. Hurry! Someone hurry and marry this woman!

Quietly wiping the tears from my eyes, I pulled myself together and continued with my suggestion. "Someone who can't get the job done and keeps on trying anyway won't get you anywhere. It's best to call a pro in the area."

"In other words, you mean abandoning the request?" Yukinoshita gave me a dubious look.

But I threw out my chest and declared, “No, I’m talking about work sharing, job rotation, outsourcing.”

At my list of business jargon, Yuigahama made a rather impressed *ooh*. “I don’t really get what you’re talking about, but it sounds pretty intense…”

Thank you for the endorsement, but you seem very gullible, so please watch out. I feel like you’d be duped into buying natural something food products and find yourself a part of a pyramid scheme.

Yukinoshita, on the other hand, always seemed like she’d have a firm head on her shoulders when it came to these things, but at the moment, she was just holding her head in her hands. *For you, I think it’d make your life happier if you could trust people a little more.*

“That’s a very nice string of vocabulary words… It all depends on how you say it, doesn’t it…?” Yukinoshita sighed, but Meguri hopped up beside her.

“But it’s all right as long as it works out, right? It’s important to trust in people and delegate!” she agreed encouragingly.

Nodding back at her, I turned to Yukinoshita again. “Yukinoshita.”

“Yes,” she replied immediately. With even that brief interaction, it seemed she’d figured out what I was thinking. And then quietly raising her hand, she looked at Meguri. “Shiromeguri, I’d like to call an advisor, as external staff,” she said.

Meguri blinked. “An advisor?” She tilted her head, confused, repeating the question.

Right after, Yuigahama did the same. “…Visor?”

“If we’re not reaching any conclusions, then there’s no point in this meeting. It’s a good idea to try asking the opinion of an expert, here,” I added.

Meguri smiled brightly. “Yeah, if they can help, that might be nice. Right, Sagami?” Even if it was in form only, Sagami was still the chair of the committee. We should see what she wanted, basically. And Meguri managed that tactfully.

Sagami must not have thought the discussion would be turned to her, as she said hurriedly, “Y-yeah. That’s right. We’re not getting many good ideas anyway…”

She was aware of what was going on now, too. There would be no reason for her to refuse. Just about anyone in this room would say the same.

But after Sagami agreed, oh-so-quietly…

…I heard just the slightest whisper, like a single droplet of water falling into india ink. It was an unvoiced sound and did not ring loud, but it lingered clearly in my ears.

"Miss Hiratsuka." But it was drowned out by Meguri's voice, and Meguri slid her gaze over to the teacher. Miss Hiratsuka nodded firmly.

Once we had her approval, I turned back to Yuigahama. "Yuigahama."

"Yeah?" Hearing her name, she pointed at herself and blinked. I beckoned her, and she moved her chair to the side, leaning over toward me.

That's closer than I expected… I briefly worried I'd get dizzy from the faint scent of her perfume and shampoo. I paused to take a breath to calm myself, and Yuigahama, confused by my weird pause, examined my face.

Like I said, too close…

The awkwardness of eye contact at close range made the both of us look away.

Trying my best to not look or think about it, I briefly explained my idea. As she listened, her face was lowered. Her ears, partially hidden beneath her brown hair, were a little red—perhaps because of the light shining through them.

Once I was done, Yuigahama lifted her face. "Got it. Then I'll go call for them." Cell phone in hand, she stood and made the call as she headed out of the meeting room.

I watched her go, then let my tired body sink into my chair.

X X X

Before long, our advisors arrived.

"So this is them?" Yuigahama looked at the two people standing in front of the door.

"Why'd you call me here?"

"Herm?"

Standing there in puzzlement were Ebina and…Zaimokuza.

Actually, I'm the one who's puzzled as to why Zaimokuza is here… Oh well. It's Zaimokuza. You can't think too hard about it.

Ebina still appeared confused as she said, "Hey, Yui. Why'd you

call me here?"

"There was something we wanted your advice on."

"Advice?" Taking a good look around the meeting room, Ebina tilted her head. Indeed, there was nothing that would connect the Sports Festival Committee and her. She could rack her brain all she wanted, but she wasn't going to crack this case.

"Well…"

"Every year, the school holds a unique event for the sports festival. But we can't quite seem to get any ideas this year… So we were hoping to get your insight," Yukinoshita told her faster than I could explain, summing up all the important points.

"I'm not doing anything, so sure, I guess…but why me?"

"Oh, Hikki picked you," Yuigahama replied.

Ebina looked at me with deep interest. "Hikitani did, eh? Huh…," she said, sounding surprised as she examined me.

"…Your musical during the cultural festival was a big success, right? If you've got any more weird ideas, let us have it."

Believe it or not, I did think highly of Ebina's ability as a producer. She's good at arrangement and direction, the type of producer who makes one into ten, so to speak. Additionally, given her accomplishments during the cultural festival, we could also trust her when it came to management and moving projects along. She also had connections with Hayama's clique, the school's upper crust. In short, there could be no better producer in Soubu High School.

"If you think I can do it, then I guess I'll give it a good shot." She gave a little *tee-hee* laugh.

Beside her, Zaimokuza made one of his noises as he shot her a sidelong look. "Hachiman! Me too! I shall also give it an earnest effort!"

"Yeah, yeah." I waved him off. He was so annoying about getting attention, tugging on my sleeve.

"Then we're counting on you. Come up with something that's got that wow factor," I said.

Ebina pushed her glasses up. "Wow factor… Something that will get people talking, right?"

"Well, basically, yeah."

"It just has to get people really into it, right…? It doesn't matter *what* they're getting excited about, right?" Up until that point, Ebina had been looking pensive, but for an instant, I saw her

putting on her shipping goggles as a leer rose on her face, and then she went back to normal.

What are you gonna have them get excited about…? Yikes; this girl is scary…

As genuine fear slowly crept across my heart, there was a loud clap.

"Oh! Yes! That sounds promising. Then first, maybe you could give us ideas for the boys' event and help us out with it." Meguri gave a summary of the discussion, and Ebina and Zaimokuza both nodded.

"Well, I'll think about it!"

"Leave this to Yoshiteru! ☆"

The both of them spoke at practically the same moment and then looked at one another.

"Then let's do our best, um…Z-Za? Zazamushi?"

The aquatic insect larva? Sounds about right.

But Yoshiteru Zazamushi's fists were trembling now, so maybe he wasn't a fan.

"Fool! I shall be victorious in this presentation showdown! I swear it! A-and…don't call me Z-Z-Zazamushi! Y-you—you—*ebi* sushi!"

And with that elementary-school-level parting insult, Zaimokuza ran off.

What's going on there? Maybe he thinks of Ebina as a serious rival or something… Is this, like, his basement-dwelling otaku*'s pride telling him he can't lose to a slash fangirl or something? Man, how dumb…*

"Since when did this become a competition…?" Yukinoshita said, confused.

"Dunno. But that might give us some good results."

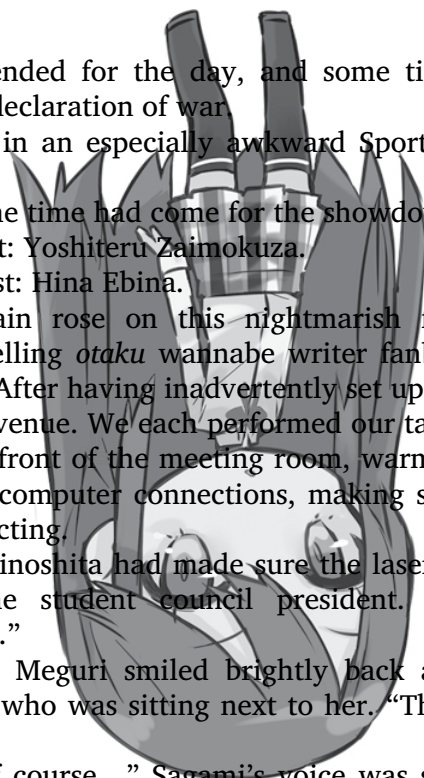
"True."

A reaction I'd expect from the girl who always wants to clearly delineate black from white, right from wrong, through victory. She was easily convinced. Is that why she likes Grue-bear? He's got black and white on him.

And thus, the bug-larvae-versus-shrimp-presentation showdown begins…

4

Haruno Yukinoshita continues to test them until the last.



Classes had ended for the day, and some time had passed since Zaimokuza's declaration of war.

We were in an especially awkward Sports Festival Committee meeting.

Finally, the time had come for the showdown.

In the east: Yoshiteru Zaimokuza.

In the west: Hina Ebina.

The curtain rose on this nightmarish face-off between the basement-dwelling *otaku* wannabe writer fanboy vs. the high-spec slash fangirl. After having inadvertently set up this match, we'd also arranged the venue. We each performed our tasks: pulling down the screen at the front of the meeting room, warming up the projector, checking the computer connections, making sure the machine was actually projecting.

Once Yukinoshita had made sure the laser pointer worked, she turned to the student council president. "Shiromeguri, we've finished setup."

"Thanks." Meguri smiled brightly back at her, then checked with Sagami, who was sitting next to her. "Then let's get started… S-Sagami?"

"Yes, o-of course…" Sagami's voice was shaking. Starting that day, Sagami would be trusted to lead the meeting by herself. As for how she was doing—she was more frightened than nervous.

But I think what she was scared of was less the position of chair and more the wild light in Ebina's eyes next to her.

"So then," Sagami began, "Hina, and…um, you…g-go right ahead…"

“Leave it to me!”

“Ah-herm…”

The excited girl and the anxious boy stood and came up beside the screen. Facing each other, they exchanged bold smiles.

Finally, the presentation showdown begins…

Surprisingly, Zaimokuza was the one to make the first move.

Generally, in this sort of competition, I feel like whoever makes the first move loses, though… Like, in cooking manga especially.

“Er-fum.” Zaimokuza stood before the screen and cleared his throat.

He let his head slump into a nod of a bow, using the computer to show an outline he’d made with PowerPoint. It displayed the surprisingly legitimate title of *Sports Festival Big Event Proposal*. The font looked kind of brush stroke–ish, but aside from that, nothing about it struck me as the work of a fanatic.

Often, the saying “Simple is best” is used as an excuse to cut corners. I say it a lot myself, too.

We were all holding our breaths, watching and wondering just what would be featured in this presentation that came under such a simple heading.

Occasionally, something like the buzzing of a mosquito that had survived into fall could be heard. It was quiet. Everyone was fully poised to listen.

But Zaimokuza never started talking.

“…… ….. …… ….. ……The end.”

Zaimokuza exhaled, then bobbed his head again and tried to leave.

Huh?! It’s over?!

N-no way. Was that mosquito whine Zaimokuza’s voice?!

“Extreme nerves prevented him from speaking at all,” Yukinoshita analyzed most calmly.

Well, when you’re not used to this stuff… School doesn’t offer many opportunities for public speaking. The fact of the matter is, a presentation stage is basically a scaffold for public humiliation. People tend to believe it’s acceptable to unconditionally criticize and judge the one forced in front of the firing line.

“Hikki.”

I understood what Yuigahama was trying to say. Well, he was trying to help us out, so we should be grateful, even to Zaimokuza. They had a good old saying, back in the day—“The knowledge of

what is right is worthless without the courage to act on it."

"Me…? Well, of course. I'm the only one, huh…?" Sadly, I was the only one there right then who was capable of communicating with Zaimokuza. Perhaps this is what communicating with the Ohmu feels like…

With a short sigh, I stood. To our first challenger, who was frozen like a statue, I said, "Zaimokuza, I'll give you a hand, so let's go through it again."

Zaimokuza's head craned around to capture me in his field of vision, creaking like Musubi or something. His stiff expression softened, like snow melting away. "…H-herm. So be it." He seemed relieved, gradually returning to normal.

That's actually kinda irritating…

"Then let's get started…" With a casual bow, I rapped the PowerPoint. "This is what we're proposing. It's the Chiba Citizenry Cavalry Battle. Huh? What the hell?" My head snapped over to look at Zaimokuza.

Now revived, Zaimokuza faced me, and with exaggerated gestures, he bellowed, "The Chiba Citizenry Cavalry Battle! For shoooort…! The Chibattle!"

You should've said that to everyone from the start… "So what the hell is this?"

"Hapum. In Chiba long ago, there was a conflict between the Satomi and Houjou families. This marvelous competition reflects that history," Zaimokuza babbled on at me.

"I think this area was all ocean back then, though. So what're the rules?" I commented as I hit the Enter key to bring up the next slide.

Then Zaimokuza stopped my hand. "Oh, no, wait, Hachiman! Um, this is kind of a bit embarrassing! The next slide isn't properly done yet! It's only half-done, just a rough draft! Like a sketch, okay?! I—I wasn't serious about making it, you know!" Desperately threatening excuses, he yanked hard at my hand, and the force of it made me press the Enter key by accident.

"Hogeeeeeeee!" Zaimokuza wailed, and something like a photoshopped image showed up. It was a pretty sloppy one: a picture of an armored warrior had been laid on top of your average, normal chicken fight photo. He must have cut and pasted it with MS Paint, as it was ridiculously low quality. His shitty photo manipulation exposed to the whole crowd, Zaimokuza froze yet

again.

In the meantime, I decided to move things along. “Um, the rules are just about the same as a normal chicken fight. You pick out riders called captains, who’ll be wearing armor cosplay, and whichever team brings down the most captains wins. This makes it more tactical than a regular chicken fight and also provides a strong visual impact… Huh, these rules are surprisingly normal.” Skipping the part at the end that said *Captain Sakura and a storm of dramatic adventure (lol)*, I read out the explanation of the rules. Frankly, I couldn’t hide my surprise at Zaimokuza’s actually legitimate idea.

“Y-you think?” It seemed Zaimokuza was baffled that someone actually approved.

“That’s simple and easy to understand. Easy to imagine, too.” Meguri nodded. It seemed his miserable edit had also been enough to communicate the gist of it. When she offered a little applause, it spread weakly through the room.

Well, you know. It doesn’t matter if you did the job right; if you’ve expressed it in the wrong way, you often won’t gain approval. Honestly, I think those methods of expression should be a part of education. Then maybe there’d be fewer traumatic incidents in class.

Zaimokuza was surprised to be receiving applause, glancing around all over the place restlessly. “H-Hachiman, what on earth…?”

“Well, it doesn’t seem like a bad idea. Nice work.” With a light pat on his shoulder, I returned to my own seat.

“H-hurr…” Upon receiving that unexpectedly good reception, Zaimokuza gave a tiny, satisfied smile.

The applause instantly died and was replaced with whispers about how creepy he was.

He’d have been fine without that, though…

X X X

Once Zaimokuza had finished his presentation, next it was Ebina’s turn.

As expected, with her experience on *Hoshimyu* ☆ and her high social status, she seemed accustomed to the activity as she began

her explanation. “Um, so this was my idea.”

With a click of the Enter key, she moved the PowerPoint slides along. On the cover slide was written *Pole Pull-Down*.

That’s surprisingly normal… I thought this was Ebina, here… Maybe this is not in fact Hina Ebina, but Vigna Ghina?

“The key point here is the captains. While somewhat similar to the earlier presentation, this event stresses charisma over strategy.” Taking no notice of my doubtful look, Ebina continued her explanation smoothly.

Hmm, she’s actually got a lot going for her in a low-key sort of way. Personnel like her is rather uncommon—she’s got the ideas, the skills, and the leadership.

“Hayato Hayama is popular among students and captain of the soccer team. Making him a team captain in the pole pull-down will get everyone’s attention.” The slide quickly switched to the next one, displaying a photo of Hayama wearing a particularly charming and bright smile.

What the heck is this…? I was already tired of this, but the girls of the committee were tittering excitedly. It was super-effective. It seemed Sagami in particular highly approved of this.

If their response was any indication, the other girls in the school would probably react in a fairly similar way. Ebina’s casting choice was not wrong. Her strategy of choosing the right crowd-pleaser to maximize payoff was spot-on.

However, it seemed there was still a hole in this plan, as her face clouded with worry. “Hayato will be on the white team, so you need someone else on the red team… Um, is there anyone who seems like they’d be good for the red team?” Ebina’s gaze turned to Sagami, the chair.

“Um, I wonder…” Sagami wore a pensive look.

Meanwhile, Meguri turned the question to the meeting room as a whole. “Are there red team people here? If you know someone, it would really help if you could come up with some candidates.”

Everyone began asking each other what team they were on. But no good names came up. Meguri herself *hmm*’d and considered the matter before calling out, “Ah! Yukinoshita, you guys are on the red team, right? Can you think of anyone?”

“Huh?! Hikitani, you’re on the red team?!” Ebina suddenly jumped on that. In fact, she literally jumped on me. “Then we’re set with Hikitani! Having the two captains on opposing teams as a red-

and-white-themed ship is so auspicious, let's just go ahead and celebrate! My ship is sailing!!"

No, it's not; it's gonna sink right there in the harbor.

"Hem, so Hachiman was also of the red…" Zaimokuza smirked.

Meaning he's red team, too…? I started thinking we could just make him the captain, but it really had to be someone who would be on the same level as Hayama… If you wanted an equal and opposite vector, I feel like Zaimokuza could be on a level with him, but concept-wise, that wouldn't work.

Of course, for the same reasons, my being captain wasn't an option, either. It had to be someone like Hayama, who would be broadly popular and supported by the masses.

But Ebina's shipping goggles were firmly over her eyes now as she rampaged onward. "A-anyway, Ebina will, um, Ebina will, without trying to hide her surprise and confusion and joy, continue explaining calmly. Um, H-Hayato will be on the white team, and Hikitani will go red while Hayato pulls his stick… Blerk!" Her head spasmed backward, and then she stopped moving.

Sensing a rapidly deteriorating situation, Meguri nodded at the student council. They briskly moved into action, tugging Ebina's hand and taking her outside. Watching her being dragged away, I was reminded of the Roswell incident.

I would use this opportunity to scrap the part about me captaining the red team. Well, even if I didn't, I'm sure everyone would be against it. "I'm on the committee, so I can't. If we're doing the pole pull-down, let's look for some other candidate."

"Hmm, that's right. And we have to decide which we're doing, first." Meguri also nodded. "Then, Sagami, how about we take a vote?"

"Right. Okay, everyone who'd like to do the cavalry battle?"

There were a few scattered raised hands.

"Next, everyone who thinks the pole pull-down would be good?" Sagami said, also raising her own hand. There was just about the same smattering of hands raised for this one.

It was close, but by the slightest margin, I figured there were more for the pole pull-down. They'd be able to see Hayama as the star for that event, after all, so no surprises there.

"The numbers are about the same, huh…?" Meguri said after counting.

They could just go ahead and select the pole pull-down now.

That's an option, after taking a vote. Even if the numbers for the minority opinion are just about equal, a little less than half the votes, you can toss it out. The more you increase your parameters, the more people you can round out of the equation.

This is how majority rule works. You might say this system has some fatal flaws, and thus is wrong. Which means that minority rule is correct, which means a minority like me is always correct, huh? I see; so I was justice all along…

"So then how about we make it so that the boys do the pole pull-down…," Sagami said, tossing out a decision, "…and then we make the chicken fight the big event for the girls, and we do both?"

"Ohhh, I see." Meguri liked that idea, clapping her hands. Then she looked over at Miss Hiratsuka, who nodded, too. It seemed her policy was, as usual, to leave all decision-making to the students' discretion.

After checking with the teacher, Meguri scanned the whole room. "What do all you guys think?"

Well, it was a reasonable decision. The proposals had each been supported by about half the people there. Nobody really argued when Meguri posed the question to everyone.

With majority rule, the important thing is mitigating the fallout of silencing half the room's opinions.

In that area, I could give Sagami's decision a passing grade. I don't think it was a bad call. The chicken fight was just as good as the pole pull-down as a concept, and it had actually gained the approval of the executives and the student council.

But the reaction of the crowd here was weak.

For an instant, an unpleasant murmur ran through the room. Whispers wriggled toward me like the sound of insect legs.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama both astutely picked up on this omen.

"…" Narrowing her eyes, Yukinoshita looked toward the source of the voices. Sagami hadn't yet noticed, but the atmosphere here had already changed.

"Um, since it looks like nobody is against it, I'll take it we can settle on the chicken fight for the girls? Now let's decide on who's doing what." The success of her own idea put Sagami in a great mood. "I'll hand out a table of what's on the program, so everyone please come to the front to write down what you want to work on," she instructed.

Then the student council started distributing printouts. Next we had some time to think on our own for a while, and once we made our decisions, we would go to write them on the whiteboard.

While I was looking at my own sheet, wondering if I had to make up my mind here, too, Meguri stepped up to my side. “We’re planning to have you guys as our management headquarters on the day of the event, so you don’t have to pick a task for yourselves.”

“All right. Then shall we begin making assignments for supervision?” Yukinoshita nodded, proposing a separate meeting among the executives.

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

“Oh, then Sagamin, too…” Yuigahama looked for Sagami. But they were in the same meeting room. It was impossible to lose Sagami at this range.

So we could see her clearly.

“Who’ll be in charge of what, then? I’d like to be in charge of the pole pull-down,” Sagami said. “Hey, Yukko, Haruka, come join me.”

Sagami was with Haruka and Yukko—the ones she’d been with during the time of the Cultural Festival Committee as well. You could say it was inevitable that she’d approach them for this sports festival, too.

But they clearly seemed more distant than the last time.

Haruka and Yukko shared a look, and then as if they’d planned it, they said basically the same thing.

“Um, we can’t…”

“We have our club, so we can’t really handle that much prep…”

The slight distance that had opened between her and the two girls confused Sagami for just a moment. But she quickly pasted on a smile. “Oh… Huh? But that’ll make the event less exciting later, right?” she said.

And then, as synchronized as if they’d divided up the parts beforehand, they pulled the gentle rejection move.

“Yeah, that’s true, but we have our tournament and stuff…”

“It really is hard for us to make the time, so I dunno if we wanna go crazy…”

“Oh, but don’t worry about us, Minami! You do the one you like!”

By repeatedly bringing up the issue of clubs, territory that Sagami couldn’t touch, and by showing consideration to Sagami at

the end, they drove the conversation to its conclusion.

That sequence of moves was kind of like how you close a game of chess.

"O-oh… Yeah, of course." Sagami put on a particularly bright smile to emphasize that she wasn't bothered.

"Sorry." They both apologized to stress that they really were sad about this. Now the negotiation was at a close.

That was right when Yuigahama called out to her. "Heeey, Sagamin! Meetiiing!"

"Ohhh yeah, coming, coming! Then I'll see you guys later!" Sagami waved to the two of them, and then once she was back with the executives, we got ready to start the meeting.

"Ahoy, Hachiman… What should I be doing?"

"Huh? …Oh, well, we're gonna be adding in the chicken fight, too, so it'll be good to have you around," I replied, and Zaimokuza gave me a *herm* and a nod, then thudded down in a nearby chair.

Well, that's fine for Zaimokuza, but what do we do about Ebina? She isn't back yet; is that fine? Is she still out in Area 51…?

When Sagami took her seat, the meeting of the executives began.

We confirmed the necessary roles and decided who was taking what. We could leave it to the crew to manage personnel while all the events were going on.

The issue was everything else: first aid, broadcasting, the things that needed to be built in time for the event, plus setting up the venue. This was something we also couldn't manage with the executives alone, so we had to circulate a certain amount of work to the crew.

Meguri explained what had been done in past years, and then Sagami nodded and tried to move on to the next topic. "Then besides that, what we need is…"

"The whole school will be involved in the major events," Yukinoshita explained, "so we'll have everyone on scene during the events. So perhaps it would be best for everyone to mobilize all the girls for the girls' event and all the boys for theirs."

"Oh, of course." Sagami clued in once it was pointed out to her and quietly stood up. Already the crew were starting to divide up the labor on their own, so we had to tell them this quickly and communicate to them what the total amount of work would be.

"Pardon me! We'll be requesting that everyone participate in

the big events. Please write something else down for what you'll be in charge of!"

Sagami's words caused some murmurs within the crew, and they were not good murmurs. Apparently, this idea was not very popular.

And a couple of them froze right where they were.

It was Haruka and Yukko, who Sagami had just been talking with. The two of them exchanged soft whispers, then nodded at each other.

In perfect sync, they took a step forward.

"Um, Minami, we think that's a bad idea." I couldn't tell which of them spoke, but it sent another wave of murmurs rippling through the meeting room.

"Huh…?" Sagami failed to respond to such direct opposition. It seemed like she couldn't understand what they were saying. I doubt anyone there actually had a correct grasp on the situation.

"We don't think we can cooperate if everyone is forced to participate in these events…," the other one said.

Sagami went pale. "Um, but we all decided this together… right? Right?"

"But we all have clubs… We'd have to decide on different events…"

"We can't be taking too much time with prep or have anything too big."

Sagami had no reply to their insistence.

Most of the members of this committee had been sent from the athletic clubs. This was a different bloc from the executive side, which was formed mainly of student council members.

Meguri had a complicated expression. "Um, it's true that it'll be difficult, but couldn't we ask you to help us out somehow?" she asked hesitantly.

Unsurprisingly, it was difficult for Haruka and Yukko to argue against the student council president to her face, and they both looked away and said nothing. But that was not at all an agreement.

Meguri gave a strained smile at their stubborn attitude.

It was clear which side was more committed to this project.

From where the executives stood, since we were asking the crew a *favor*, we couldn't come down hard on them. There was no clear hierarchical relationship built into this situation. That was why, even if Sagami was the committee chair, they were still

nothing more than fellow members on the same project, so she couldn't order them around. There was no need for them to submit to her request.

It was a structural flaw.

If there had been a relationship built on trust here, then they'd probably have accepted this request. Most likely, Meguri and her predecessors had always done it like that. But Sagami and her friends didn't have that. No—maybe it would be more accurate to say they'd lost it.

Their close relationship during the cultural festival prep had been enabled by their shared position on it. However, in the Sports Festival Committee, Sagami was with the executives while the other two were in the crew, so their club activities and the clear burden posed by the higher workload had caused this difference to emerge between them.

This was a bad sign.

Sagami's fairly trivial words and actions had generated ripples, and those must have come from the two girls. She had upset them more and more each time she failed to take the crew's position into account.

And now that was erupting.

"Let's leave it at that," came a strong voice that carried well.

Looking over, I saw Miss Hiratsuka had come to her feet, throwing open the door. "It's getting late. Let's call it a day and discuss it again another time."

The executives and crew were both in different positions, but they were both students. A voice had to come from a level higher than them in order to force action. The only thing that could bring this to a close was Miss Hiratsuka.

Haruka and Yukko looked at each other, then snatched up their bags and pattered out of the meeting room. The rest of the crew followed their lead.

The only ones left were the executives: the student council, the Service Club, and Sagami.

"Shiromeguri, do you have a minute?" Miss Hiratsuka called, and Meguri went outside, too.

"Coming…"

Silence fell on the meeting room.

Sagami stood frozen for another moment, then practically collapsed into a nearby chair.

The light of the inclining sun poured into the meeting room.

The brilliance of the setting sun made Sagami look down to the floor.

X X X

The afterglow of the sunset dyed the sky red. The clouds billowing from the ocean blanketed the western sky with brilliant flames, while darkness was slowly spreading farther inland.

A morose atmosphere hung heavy throughout the meeting room.

After the announcement that we were adjourned, there had been no progress. The whole crew had left, including Haruka and Yukko, and most likely returned to their clubs.

We were waiting for Miss Hiratsuka and Meguri to return.

Zaimokuza breathed a leaden sigh, twisting around uncomfortably. Yuigahama and the student council followed his lead and sighed, too. Except for Yukinoshita, who was still sitting dignified and straight with her eyes closed.

Meanwhile, the rest of us just felt awkward and out of place, and we were all starting to focus on one person.

Minami Sagami.

After her tenure as the chair of the Cultural Festival Committee, she'd been wheedled into taking up the position of chair of the Sports Festival Committee, too, but you couldn't see in her any dignity befitting that title. She hadn't opened her mouth once since the meeting had ended. Her forehead was down on her desk, and every once in a while, you could hear the sound of her nails tapping on her smartphone. I couldn't see her face from where I was sitting, but I could tell she wasn't happy.

Sagami had spent the cultural festival with her friends, but this time, they disagreed with her. In front of everyone, too, which added to the burden.

Having those connections in the first place is what makes it sting when they're broken.

I didn't think *Serves you right*. I actually felt sorry for her.

Though I doubt they'd ever been all that close to begin with, relationships are fickle things. They only cut so sharply when

they're lost.

The return is low, but there's risk all over the place.

It's the sort of relationship where you don't really know how you got acquainted, but you know their faces and run into them occasionally at school and say *'Sup* when you do, and maybe you might have one or two conversations.

They're different from the fixed relationships you have with people in your class or your club. The Cultural Festival Committee and Sports Festival Committee are perfect examples of that. I hear they call these sorts of limited connections "'sup friends." Komachi told me that at some point… Does that even count as a friend? Isn't that bar too low to count as friendship?

Sagami's miscalculation had been the presence of Haruka and Yukko, her 'sup friends. To be more precise, I'd say it was because the two of them were in a different position from Sagami this time around. Sagami was there as an executive, while Haruka and Yukko were there as crew. Color-coded points of difference easily become live coals.

If the three of them had been in the same position, just like during the cultural festival, then they'd probably have gotten along. They'd have enjoyed themselves and chatted as they worked: *She shouldn't have been chair; this job sucks; they're ordering us around, but they're hardly working themselves, huh?*

The efficacy of backbiting and slander in communication is immeasurable: the sharing of experience and perception, the display of your own viciousness, the knowledge of that viciousness giving each party a hold on the other's weakness, the consciousness of being conspirators, the unity brought about by that consciousness. Furthermore, slandering each other lets off steam and makes the communication after that smoother.

Backbiting is the best. You can get along with anyone. It just sucks for your target.

A friendship built on some kind of sacrifice will always require fresh meat. Once the supply is cut off, then you must offer up one of your own.

It started with their difference in positions and continued with Sagami's repeated screwups. And then the fact that it was two against one had made it completely clear to me that Sagami would be the lamb for live sacrifice. Right about now, Haruka and Yukko would be entertaining themselves with all kinds of malicious gossip

about not only Sagami, but the executives, too.

I felt sorry for Sagami because I could see all of it. Watching her still clutching her cell phone and trying to cling to some kind of connection just made it worse. And I doubt I was the only one feeling sympathetic.

Yuigahama pressed her lips together and glanced at Sagami.

No matter what our purpose had been, we'd been the ones to push Sagami to be chair. Maybe Yuigahama felt a little guilty about that.

"Meguri and Miss Hiratsuka are taking a while, huh?" Yuigahama didn't seem to be speaking to anyone in particular, but her comment lightened the air in the room somewhat.

"Yes…," Yukinoshita replied, quietly raising her gaze.

"Should we go see how things are coming along?" one of the student council members asked, standing.

But Yukinoshita shook her head. "I'm sure they're not done talking, and I think going now wouldn't change much," she replied coolly, and the representative quickly acquiesced.

But I could understand the student council's impatience. Miss Hiratsuka and Meguri's discussion was dragging out longer than expected.

By the time the two of them came back, I figure about twenty minutes had passed. Miss Hiratsuka's expression was far more serious than usual, and Meguri was looking rather dejected as they came into the meeting room.

"Sorry to make you wait," Miss Hiratsuka said, and with that one remark, she took a seat in the chair at the very edge of the meeting room, while Meguri also headed for her seat in the middle.

Once all eyes had gathered on her, Miss Hiratsuka said, "After discussing with Shiromeguri, we're thinking we'll cancel the next meeting."

"We've decided to give everyone some time to cool down and see how things will go…," Meguri added.

Well, that was a pretty reasonable decision, in my opinion. Since we couldn't eliminate the cause of the tension around us, we had no choice but to wait for time to erase them—or maybe wear them down.

But I doubted that would be enough.

"Will it work out in only a day or two, though?" Yuigahama muttered.

“Yeah, I doubt it…”

Anger, as an emotion, doesn’t last that long. That was why it was the correct decision to have a brief cooldown period. But even if anger doesn’t last, hate and resentment will go on. They’ll keep smoldering deep, deep in the darkness, and like glowing embers, they’ll burn and burn, slowly and quietly.

And what’s even worse is that derision, teasing, and contempt will continue even longer. Dragging someone down is far easier than building them up, and when people start getting witty about it, the whole thing becomes just another way to have fun. Keep it casual, and everyone treats it like a joke. Since you don’t even think you’re doing something wrong, unlike hate or a grudge, it becomes a cycle that continues in the long term.

It was very possible that things would get worse over the next few days.

“Still, it’s better than holding a meeting with the way things are now,” Miss Hiratsuka said, sounding pained. She must have sensed my misgivings.

Miss Hiratsuka was right; if they were to suddenly face each other again the next day, it would be hard to imagine that going well. Given how Sagami herself was acting, the probability was even higher.

When I glanced at Sagami, she was biting her lips instead of saying anything.

“So can I take it you’re fine with that?” Miss Hiratsuka confirmed with her, and she nodded.

“Yeah…I am…” With that broken reply, her head lowered again.

“…” Yukinoshita had been watching her intently, but then she suddenly looked at Meguri instead. “…All right, let’s notify everyone of the cancellation.”

“Yeah. The student council will handle it,” Meguri agreed, and the rest of the student council jumped right on it without her having to tell them to. I didn’t know how they did it, like with a mailing list or adding it to the morning announcements or what, but because they completed the task immediately, it must have been something fairly easy.

Watching them, Miss Hiratsuka said, “Well then, let’s adjourn for the day, too.”

Everyone said their adieus, then started to get ready to go.

“Herm. Farewell, Hachiman.” Zaimokuza was finally free after being forced to hang around us the whole time, and he quickly packed up his things and scampered out of the meeting room. The other student council members also quickly finished prep and headed home.

When I was grabbing my bag, ready to head home as well, someone called out to me specifically. “Hikigaya. You three stay awhile.”

“Huh? I mean, today’s not really…,” I protested, but Miss Hiratsuka pointed to the others with her jaw.

Looking over, I saw Yukinoshita must have anticipated staying behind, as she hadn’t moved from her spot. Yuigahama was just zoning out and didn’t really seem to have anything on her mind.

It had been determined that I would stay behind as a member of an affiliated organization. Any opposition was futile, I knew, and I reluctantly sat down.

All right, so what does she want to talk about? I wondered, waiting for her to continue.

But rather than speaking to us, Miss Hiratsuka addressed someone unexpected. “And Sagami. You too.”

Sagami twitched when she heard her name, but she showed no signs of refusal. All she said was a quiet “Okay.”

Miss Hiratsuka looked over me, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, Sagami, and Meguri, and then began. “I’ll get straight to the point. What are you going to do now?”

Yuigahama and I exchanged confused glances. But that wasn’t going to give us answers.

I looked at Yukinoshita, and she was looking at Miss Hiratsuka. Apparently, she understood at least somewhat. “Do you mean, how do we plan to manage this going forward?”

“Well, more or less. Though that’s not all…,” she said evasively. She glanced over at our chair. “Sagami, how do you plan to continue?”

“Huh…?” Sagami must not have anticipated the discussion would be turned toward her. It took her a moment before she finally said, “I don’t know; I think…we just have to do it…” All she had to offer was a hesitant, vague remark.

That didn’t answer the question, but it did basically seem she was cognizant of the current situation, that things were bad right now. She’d been asked what she would do about it, not if she

recognized the position we were in, but maybe it was a little harsh to demand that much of her right now.

Instead of sighing, Miss Hiratsuka made a solemn noise of agreement. Then she turned back to Sagami once more and began slowly. “Mm-hmm. Then first, let’s sort out the issues.” She was giving Sagami the space to confirm the situation and sum up the important points. Miss Hiratsuka fully intended to have Sagami come up with an answer to this problem herself, I think. This methodology was very like her.

Sagami’s gaze swam around as she closed and opened her mouth slightly, as if she didn’t know where to start.

Her eyes darted nervously to the rest of us and away, back and forth. She looked at me, too, but then she wrinkled her nose in shame and loathing, and looked away immediately again.

Nobody said anything. We just waited for Sagami to talk.

She must have interpreted that as pressure, as she hesitantly opened her mouth. “Um…the crew won’t listen to us.”

“…”

Well, it’s not surprising she took it that way. I didn’t feel exasperated—more like this just made sense to me. The table was completely silent.

Only one of us, Meguri, offered any reaction at all, and it was a bit of an uncomfortable smile. “Hmm… Yeah. For the sports festival and the major events to work out, the crew needs to be able to work with the sports clubs, you know? But right now, things are a little tight for everyone, so it’s difficult to get them to commit to giving the time and the effort… Maybe we could put it like that.”

“Y-yeah,” Sagami replied immediately, but it was doubtful whether she really understood Meguri’s helpful remark.

Well, I had no problem with Meguri giving hints. Since Sagami had the title of committee chair, she would be the one coming to the final conclusions. It was best to make her consider this matter right now. To put it another way, this was fine as long as Sagami was the one to come up with the conclusion in the end.

The rest of us should lead her to that conclusion.

Yukinoshita also understood this quite well; she paused for a moment, then looked at Meguri. “Meaning we negotiate and coordinate with each of the clubs… We can check the schedules of the clubs that have upcoming tournaments and determine which assignments are good for everyone.”

Yukinoshita's proposal was very respectable.

Her method was to carefully eliminate each of the reasons Haruko and Yukko had brought up—the premises they'd used as a shield, so to speak.

But that wouldn't help us here. A logical method would only work on people who thought logically.

"That's not gonna be enough," I said, and Yuigahama hesitantly agreed.

"Yeah…maybe." It seemed she understood the other issue here.

"Tell us why," Miss Hiratsuka prompted.

I explained it in very simple terms. "As long as they're still mad about what happened, we're going to stall again unless we handle this very carefully."

People act based on emotion.

Whether it's rational or not, everyone's standard of judgment is their own feelings. And after making a decision based on transient emotion, they'll construct a post hoc rationale for it.

They throw out all sorts of arguments to justify why they hate something and why they have to avoid it. No matter how much logic you use to explain, they'll find some other point to argue. It's not even worth pulling up sources.

"I don't really get it…," Sagami grumbled.

…I'm talking about you, Sagami.

I considered saying as much to her, but if she didn't understand that now, then she couldn't be self-aware about the issue. I could spell it out for her, but arguing would obviously just be a big pain in the ass.

I decided to communicate this to her succinctly, without naming names and generalizing as broadly as I could. "What I'm saying is that if someone doesn't like you, it doesn't matter if what you're saying is right. They'll be critical of you anyway."

The answer was just too simple. It was so plain and simple, I could practically call it the truth of the world. Nobody took issue with what I'd said.

Miss Hiratsuka, who'd been listening silently, breathed a short sigh and said, "…So as long as Sagami continues as the chair, this problem will keep following us around."

Her view was quite correct.

Once trust is lost, you can't get it back easily. On the other hand, losing trust is simple.

Sagami had failed.

And the world is very harsh toward failure.

A screwup at the initial stages of starting high school or university is fatal, and a failure near the very end or at a championship game will torture you into eternity.

Only the successful will reassure you that it's okay to fail. Those who can't produce results can never say it, and people who aren't yet able to succeed must not believe in these honey-sweet words.

It seemed Sagami herself could understand her failure on an emotional level, and she was paying close attention and digesting Miss Hiratsuka's words.

And then she finally caught the point.

"Does that mean…I should quit?" Sagami asked, bristling.

Miss Hiratsuka smiled awkwardly. "That's not what I'm saying. You need to recover lost ground, so it'll make things that much harder. I want you to understand that."

She was putting it delicately. Too delicately.

Recovering from failure may not always be impossible, but it's not as simple as the older or the successful say, and in many cases, failure summons further failure.

At this rate, Sagami would probably fall into a downward spiral.

Miss Hiratsuka's direct gaze was like a test of her resolve, and Sagami flinched a little. "…Ah, um…," she began, then looked over at Yukinoshita.

Maybe that meant she was searching for answers. But that was a big mistake on her part—specifically, she was seeking those from the wrong person. Look to someone who'll give you the answer you want.

With the same neutral expression as always, but a tone quite a bit chillier than usual, Yukinoshita delivered a heavy blow to Sagami. "I wouldn't mind if you were to resign now. This wasn't something you wanted to do in the first place; you did it by our request. There's no need for you to force yourself to continue."

"B-but—," Sagami started to protest.

Yukinoshita cut her off. "I was the one who asked this of you, so I'll take responsibility."

In other words, she would fulfill the responsibility of the appointment and carry out the work of the chair. It was a very realistic thing for her to say. Yukinoshita would most certainly pull

off the job better than Sagami. That was clear based on what had happened with the cultural festival.

This would fill the hole of responsibility left by Sagami. The problem that had been keeping Sagami in check was gone. The only question now was what Sagami wanted.

Her voice grave, Miss Hiratsuka asked her to confirm her resolve. “What will you do, Sagami?”

“I—I…” Her voice trembled.

I think she wanted someone to stop her. She wanted us to talk her into staying.

That way, she’d have an excuse to thrust her own responsibilities on someone else. Or more that she could maintain her self-respect by acting like she hadn’t run away, that she’d made the decision herself but for *our* sake.

But Yukino Yukinoshita would not allow that.

She was taking a gamble.

The Service Club was currently trying to fulfill the request of improving things in Class 2-F, and to that end, our goal was helping Minami Sagami regain her confidence to get rid of the negativity. And to accomplish that, we had to cut off Sagami’s escape.

If she ran away from this, then she would only be able to maintain her self-respect by trashing someone else. She’d have to make it someone else’s fault.

And if she did that, then Sagami would not have changed one bit, and neither would the mood in our class. In fact—it was possible the mood would get even worse for the sake of her pride.

To prevent that, we needed to ensure Sagami would make the decision herself. We had to cut off her path of escape by making her declare that she would be chair of her own accord.

“…”

She didn’t come up with an answer right away.

That surprised me a little.

There was actually no risk for her if she backed out now. If she turned someone of a lower rank in the class into a scapegoat, then she could maintain her reputation. When it came to Haruka and Yukko as well, they were nothing more than ’sup friends from another class; ending the relationship now wouldn’t be a big hit to her. If she ran into them in school, she just had to give them a casual hi, as if she’d forgotten about everything.

I figured the one concern for Sagami now was Hayama, if he

was talked into this. And even then, she knew full well that Hayama would never speak badly of anyone, so her pride was safe.

Personally, I thought this gamble had poor odds of success.

But if Yukinoshita had made it, she had a chance. Yukino Yukinoshita was really competitive, so there was no way she'd jump into a losing game without a plan.

Yukinoshita was closely watching every single move Sagami made, every single breath she took.

Sagami let her eyes drift steadily downward under the scrutiny, but she peeked at Yukinoshita and met her eyes.

"…If you're worried about what happens after, then your concerns are unnecessary. I don't mind if you leave it all to me." Yukinoshita struck, kicking her while she was down.

She was pretending to be considerate, but her comment was really once again deeming Sagami's existence to be worthless. She'd all but said directly that there would be no obstacles to managing this event, whether Sagami was there or not.

Sagami's cheeks moved just a bit. The corners of her mouth stiffened slightly into a fake smile that barely qualified as a smile at all.

I get it—so this was Yukinoshita's plan, huh?

She wasn't criticizing or disparaging Sagami in a concrete manner, but making Sagami realize herself what was behind those words—and then expecting her to rouse herself based on that. Yeah, I'd bet that was her goal.

Sometimes your internal voice torturing yourself is a lot more painful to hear than criticism from other people. If someone tears you down, then you just have to give as good as you get. But if you realize yourself how much you suck and start attacking yourself, then you have no idea who to complain to.

That method of cornering someone is harsh but honest.

But the way Yukinoshita was doing it now was a little different.

This motivational technique is one to use on someone who is internally motivated, someone who shows promise. It won't work on someone who's always blamed others. In fact, without any avenue of escape, she would give up.

And Sagami really looked stricken. Her posture sagged, and even her eyes were falling closed.

But Yukinoshita still did not relax her grip. She was ready to push even harder. "Sagami, you—"

“Forget it, Yukinoshita.” I cut her off.

Yukinoshita looked over at me when I did, but I could tell she wasn’t objecting.

I turned away from Sagami and faced Yukinoshita instead. “It’s not gonna end well if you keep going. If Sagami were going to change just because someone told her to, things wouldn’t have gotten this way in the first place.”

You can give the greatest speech in the world, but it would only reach someone who would accept it. If one pithy remark could change someone’s life, then the world would be a happy-happy joy-joy beautiful paradise. Anyone who achieves success from some wise sayings would have achieved that success anyway, no matter what the trigger was.

Words have no inherent power. The question is whether the person who hears them is strong enough.

And on that note, Sagami is definitely not. Oh, she’s not the only one—a lot of people are like that. Like I’m a perfect example.

After my interruption, the meeting room was silent again.

That enabled me to hear this helpless-sounding voice like a mosquito’s buzz.

“…I’ll do it.” Her hollow voice sounded a little hoarse, as if it were struggling to escape her throat. The owner of that voice was glaring at her desk, and her fingers were scrunching her skirt so tightly, they were trembling.

But nevertheless, Minami Sagami had answered.

Miss Hiratsuka unfolded her arms and gently laid them on the desk. She breathed a deep, relieved sigh. "…I see. Well then, we'll ask you to continue handling it."

But I couldn't be relieved. I was actually more anxious than before. How could Minami Sagami choose to continue as the chair?

The Sagami I knew would never have hesitated to take any available escape route; she would even grab the thread of a spider if it were dangled in front of her. And neither Hayama nor the others from our class nor Sagami's hangers-on were even there.

Those of us with her were all basically her enemies—certainly not her allies, at least.

Meguri, who was the gentlest of us with Sagami, got up and went to stand beside her. "Meaning first, you've got to repair your relationship with those girls, huh?"

"…Yeah, that's right…," Sagami muttered, not sounding confident.

"I think if you talk about it, they'll understand," Meguri chided kindly with a clap on Sagami's shoulder.

Miss Hiratsuka, watching their exchange, suddenly turned to face us instead. It seemed she'd judged she could leave Sagami to Meguri. "Assuming we leave the coordinating with the crew to Sagami…"

"We'll be coordinating with the clubs. We have to put things in order before the next meeting and prepare to offer our explanation," Yukinoshita replied immediately, and Miss Hiratsuka nodded with satisfaction. At that, Yukinoshita took out a ballpoint pen and notebook. "I'll be the one to confirm all the clubs' tournament schedules and assign tasks to accommodate that…"

As Yukinoshita swiftly made up her task list, Yuigahama slid back the chair beside her. "Then I'll contact the captains of the sports clubs. I basically know them all."

"Yes, please do." Yukinoshita smiled at Yuigahama, who nodded with an affirmative noise. She seemed glad Yukinoshita was trusting her with that.

"Also, we must look into how much we can reduce the labor necessary for the Chibattle…" Putting her pen to her chin, Yukinoshita considered for a moment. Then she slid her gaze over

to me. "…We have one person here whose hands are free," she said.

"Huh…? Uh, well, um…" That made me look down at my hands. *Huh? Are my hands really so worthless? People wouldn't pay a single yen for them? This is exploitation.*

"Well then, you'll go discuss cutting costs for the Chibattle. The pole pull-down isn't as high effort, so it should be fine as is," Yukinoshita said, briskly advancing the discussion when I failed to answer.

"You can tell me to discuss it, but it's not happening. Don't give me a job that involves communication. Guys like me are best suited to tasks like making artificial flowers in the corner of a dark room or putting the strawberries on top of cakes at a factory bakery." Or reading manga in the back room of a convenience store late at night, or returning magazines I don't like. I mean, I'm not suited to work in the first place. "They say 'The right person in the right place,' right?" I repeated the wonderful saying I'd brought up before at some point.

But Yukinoshita was not listening. "Yes, and that's why. This is something only you can do, isn't it? Who else could communicate with that…Za, Zai…Zaitsu?"

Yukinoshita was destroying me with logic and facts here. *But learn his name already!*

"I don't really feel like I'm communicating with him, though… He doesn't listen at all, either."

"Then just text him instead." And now Yuigahama was arguing me down.

True, maybe we could have some decent exchanges through text. Plus, I wouldn't have to see his face, so all I had to do was write out what I wanted.

But I hate texting.

Being the one to send the first message kind of makes me feel like a loser, and I hate it. Why does this unwritten rule exist that with texting, the boy always has to be the one to start it? That stupid rule just raises a massive hurdle, and it hits real hard when you send the first message and then get no response. And that's why you'll never find a question mark in any of my texts post–middle school, okay?

Well, this time it was Zaimokuza, so whatever. I don't have to be careful with him at all—in fact, he'll be okay even if I treat him like less than garbage, so that wasn't something I had to worry

about.

"…Well, I'll just get it done however," I replied reluctantly.

Yukinoshita nodded. "Thank you."

"Mm."

Zaimokuza was used to his proposals getting shot down anyway. I'd rip him a new one and reject everything about him.

With that, we'd established a system for the division of labor. Yukinoshita was on scheduling and shift coordination, Yuigahama was negotiating with the sports club captains, and I was going to discuss the cost cuts. I could call that a decent win.

I didn't want to get an even greater workload. I should probably consider myself lucky that this was all I'd gotten. In fact, in terms of actual labor, mine would be the easiest.

But was it okay to leave this much to the girls?

Yuigahama especially would certainly have a large burden. It was quite clear that communicating with the sports clubs would be difficult when these seeds of conflict had been sown. So reducing that burden would be the duty—nay, the destiny of a capable man, a gifted loner elite—a Lolita, if you will. But I didn't know any club captains, so I couldn't help Yuiga— *Aaahhhhhh, wait! I do, don't I?! I know a club captain! He's a real hell of a club captain, my Totsuka—whoops, I mean my acquaintance. I do know one!*

That's gonna trigger my conscience and sense of compassion. This is totally compassion here.

I earnestly lined up excuses for myself. A very important step.

Once I had finished the All-Hachiman Internal Debate Tournament, I cleared my throat as if a thought had just struck me that moment. "Ah, Yuigahama, if you like, I do happen to know Totsuka's number, so how about I contact him? I mean, if I'm already texting one person, might as well text another. And it's gonna be hard for you to contact all the clubs, right? Just as a side thing, so you totally don't have to worry about it."

It's important to make excuses to others, too!

But this just confused Yuigahama, and she waved her hands frantically. "Huh? It's fine, it's fine, sorry, I know his number, too. Leave it to me!" She made a pair of fists, then puffed out her chest to emphasize her reliability. After such a firm declaration, I couldn't quibble and fight it. *Um, well, I didn't mean you were unreliable…*

And as the finisher, Yuigahama turned away slightly, then looked up at me a little bashfully. "But…um, thanks."

"…You're welcome." Though I hadn't at all been trying to do her a favor, I was forced to reply with that. Agh, I'd lost my excuse for texting Totsuka. And even worse, it felt like my ulterior motives had been exposed. Ouch.

As my conscience tormented me and brought my spirits low, Miss Hiratsuka opened her mouth. "Now you have a concrete plan, so let's leave it at that for today." She smoothly stood and said to Meguri, "Shiromeguri. I'll lock the door, so you can go home now."

"Oh, okay!" Meguri had been talking to Sagami this whole time and answered with a raised hand. Then she gently patted Sagami's back, prompting her to get going home. "Go on, Sagami. We'll try again next week."

"…Okay." Though her voice sounded weak, Sagami did reply, grabbing her bag. And then with Meguri accompanying her, she left the meeting room.

The rest of us soon decided to follow her, and we all picked up our bags and headed for the door. The lights flickered out—Miss Hiratsuka must have flipped the switch.

A voice came from the twilight at my back.

"I'm putting even more on you kids again." I turned around to see Miss Hiratsuka standing in the rays of the slanting sun. The light was coming from behind her, so I couldn't see her expression, but her tone was gentler than usual.

"Ohhh, it's totally okay, though. I'm having lots of fun."

"And that's what our club does, after all."

The replies came from a cheerful voice and then a more refined one.

"You were the one who made me do all this in the first place."

When I offered my monotone reply, Miss Hiratsuka smiled brightly.

X X X

It seemed we were getting further into fall, as the empty entranceway felt even chillier.

Three sets of footsteps echoed sparsely. One ticked out a regular, fixed rhythm, while another pattered in light hops, and the final pair scraped heavily across the floor.

Stuffing her feet into loafers with crushed heels, Yuigahama took a step ahead of me and turned back. “It’s a good thing Sagamin is staying chair, huh?”

“I dunno. I feel like if she did quit, it’d be good for a lot of things, though,” I replied, throwing down my shoes with a *smack* and then shoving my feet into them.

Yukinoshita walked up quietly from behind. “I’m sure it would, if you were only considering the sports festival.”

“But then nothing’d change, huh?” Yuigahama gave a couple of nods.

Well, that was true. A very reasonable point.

The Service Club had accepted two requests: to make the sports festival a success and to improve Sagami’s reputation, giving her confidence and improving the atmosphere in the class.

It was true that this was a great opportunity to accomplish both requests at the same time. But fulfilling both of these particular requests at once would be a difficult problem.

The bottleneck was Minami Sagami. We couldn’t eliminate or control her. It was a gutsy move to convince her to stay on the pitching mound, given the situation.

I flicked a doubtful look over toward Yukinoshita. “But that was a hell of a way to motivate her. If you push someone like that, normally they’ll quit. If it had been me, I’d have left right there.” That had been way beyond telling her, like, *If you’re not into it, then you can just leave*. Isn’t that what they call an abuse of power, or a power puff or something? Mm, the latter sounds wrong.

Anyway, Yukinoshita is the type you don’t want mentoring new employees.

But Yukinoshita put her finger to her jaw, tilting her head. Then she declared nonchalantly, “Oh, but didn’t I merely tell the truth?”

“Yeah, it was the truth, but…”

Yeah, yeah, of course it was the truth; you don’t have to be Detective Conan to get that.

But I’m told it’s a new era now. When it comes to training new employees, people say stuff like *Don’t be too harsh* and *Don’t yell at them*. Going too far would have the opposite effect.

I gave Yukinoshita a look of deep doubt, but she swept her hair off her shoulders and said carelessly, “…A mouse will bite a cat when it’s cornered, won’t it?”

“…”

Is this the way you nurture talent? You're not a cat—the way you tear into people is more like a lion or tiger or something, okay?

A cornered mouse biting a cat is cute, and this is not cute. We're talking lions. She's bad enough that I could drop proverbs like "A lion will throw its own young into a bottomless ravine and kill it." "A lion will hunt a rabbit with all its might and kill it." "One must drive all the insects out of a lion's body to kill them."

When I couldn't find a reply, Yuigahama laughed awkwardly and changed the subject. "…Ah-ha-ha. Uh, but, like, Sagamin really hates you, huh, Hikki?"

"Heh, guess so."

"You're proud of it?!" For some reason, Yuigahama was shocked.

You just figured that out? I was fully aware of that long ago. And, like, if *she* liked me, I'm not sure how I'd feel about myself. You know, like with Hayama.

And it's not as if Sagami's the only one who hates me anyway.

"Actually, you know—never mind Sagami; most people hate me," I said.

Yuigahama pondered awhile before she said, "That's not what I mean. I think insults from you bother her more than anything. I mean, when you told Yukinon to forget about it, she was really glaring daggers at you…"

"Well, I guess that's true. If someone you think of as below you talks to you like they're above you, you're gonna want to kill them once or twice. Obviously."

"Uh, I think murder's kinda extreme, though…" Yuigahama was a little exasperated.

But people will kill over all sorts of stupid reasons, so let's take care not to invite an untimely death, shall we? Your speech in particular is something you should watch out for.

Usually, *who* says something has greater weight than *what* is said. Even if the point is the same. The meaning will change greatly depending on the rank, title, or caste of the one saying it.

That's exactly why those who are not bound by caste and those who have no further to fall can say whatever they want. Loners are allowed freedom of speech. On the other hand, speech is heavily regulated for those of the top caste. Suppression of speech in this day and age—what sort of totalitarian nation is this? Loners are seriously developed countries, you know?

Ignoring how I'd convinced myself of my superiority to the top caste yet again, Yuigahama clapped her hands like she'd just realized something. "Oh, maybe that's why Sagamin's gotten motivated now?"

"Huh?" I asked dumbly. Where did that come from?

Yuigahama trotted over, coming up by Yukinoshita's side to examine her face. "Hey, Yukinon, did you say that stuff knowing Hikki'd stop you?"

"…Perhaps, or perhaps not. I really couldn't say," Yukinoshita replied briefly, and then she briskly went on ahead.

Yuigahama and I exchanged looks. Then she gave me a rather smug smile.

Hey, don't go reading my game…

The air of the twilight dyed the school building, fields, and everything in crimson. Maybe even my face, too.

X X X

A breeze blew in from the open window. When the dead of night approached, the temperature dropped heavily, and in the distance, I could hear insects chirping.

My hands paused over the book I was reading, and I headed to the living room.

I still wasn't sleepy. The next day was the weekend. There was no school. I could sleep till noon.

It'd be nice to have a cup of coffee and enjoy the long autumn night.

Switching on the light in the living room, I headed for the sink in our kitchen peninsula, twisted on the faucet, and ran some water into the electric kettle. I stopped when I had enough, then briskly set it on the stand and waited awhile for it to boil.

As I watched the electric kettle in the quiet kitchen, I thought back on that day.

On Sagami.

On Haruka and Yukko.

With things like this, I really couldn't keep saying this wasn't my business. Since it was clear I couldn't avoid work here, now the issue would be how much I could reduce my own workload.

My main task was to deal with Zaimokuza, but that was just for the time being. As the planning of the event moved forward, the miscellaneous work would pile up, and then those miscellaneous tasks would be tossed into my lap wholesale, although it was as yet unclear what the scope of that work would be.

Judging from my experience with the cultural festival, I'd be touching on just about everything, wouldn't I? What the hell, I'm like the newest employee at another Exploitation, Inc.

Depending on how Sagami performed, Yukinoshita would be loaded with more work, and then work would get passed to me. The important thing would be to keep Yukinoshita from wielding that discretion.

Though I doubted I could manage that.

As long as Sagami was the chair, the clear problem would remain, and that was exactly what we'd discussed in the meeting room after school.

But no matter how hopeless she was, as long as she wanted to not be hopeless, then we could reach out to her. I think that's the ideal of the Service Club that Yukinoshita believes in.

If you have the will, then we offer the way. The issue was how to present that.

As I mulled over the situation, I heard the water boiling.

Well, we'd have to see how Sagami behaved after the weekend, or we wouldn't be able to come up with countermeasures or anything. She and those girls might just nonchalantly resume their old superficial, friendly relationship…

I dropped that thought there, then dumped a random amount of instant coffee into a mug. When I reached out to the electric kettle, suddenly the door opened timidly.

"What's up, Bro?"

Looking over, I saw Komachi with a headband that exposed the cold pack stuck on her forehead. It seemed she'd come out for a study break. Kamakura was yawning wide at her feet.

"…Oh, I thought I'd have a coffee. You want some?"

"Yeah!" Komachi answered instantly, then plopped down on the sofa. Kamakura hopped up beside her.

I quickly poured her a coffee, sloshed in some milk and sugar, and carried it to the sofa. "Here."

"Thanks." When I handed her the mug, Komachi blew on it to cool it, then put her lips to the rim.

Watching her, I leaned against the counter. “How’s your studying going? Good?” I asked, just meaning to make small talk.

But Komachi sighed deeply. “Study…study…stud…y…” Her words broke off, and her body went still, as if her soul had just wafted out of her. Not good, then.

Maybe there’s no point saying this now, but Komachi is dumb. Nonetheless, she’s shrewd and good at thinking on her feet. She’s also tactful and cute, and she can do all kinds of chores, and she’s good at cooking, too. Whoops! Not sure how I ended up bragging about my little sister instead.

Anyway, if you consider who she is at her core, I think she knows how to study properly. The fact that it doesn’t quite lead to good grades for her is an issue of effort and, more than that, an issue of efficiency.

“Listen, Komachi. With entrance exams, you don’t have to get full points on all subjects. You’ve got to take into account what you’re good at and what you’re not, plus your own potential, and then figure out how you’ll deal with each subject, or you’ll waste time.”

“Bro… Teach me your ways…”

What is wrong with this girl? She was looking at me with hollow eyes while she moaned a low, pained *urgh*. She must have had people telling her this kind of stuff all the time, as she shook her head like she was shaking it off.

Well, I didn’t want to speak in such vague and abstract terms, either. If your advice isn’t specific, you’re basically going on about yourself.

Now, I should narrow down my point to offer advice. “So what subject are you struggling with?”

“Japanese…,” Komachi said, shoulders listlessly drooping.

“I’ve never struggled with Japanese, so I don’t know how to study it.”

Maybe it’s ’cause I’ve been reading all the time since I was little, but I’ve never struggled on Japanese tests. I can suss out the feelings of the authors in reading question texts, and I can even do the same for the ones who set the questions. Then you just memorize the kanji and classical Japanese vocab and grammar, and you’re done… Since I’d always solved these problems with no issue, I couldn’t understand what part of Japanese Komachi was stuck on or why she got stuck. *Sorry your big bro is so competent.*

When I gave her a look that said, *Anything else?* Komachi raised her hand with an *ohhh*. “Social studies.”

“Just memorize it.”

Social studies is mostly memorization. Whether it’s Japanese history, world history, geography, or civics, all you need to do is memorize. There are entrance exams to some high schools that have essay answers, but if you make sure to memorize those, too, then you’ll have no problem writing them.

When I gave her a look that said, *Is there any more?* Komachi raised her hand yet again. “Science.”

“That’s also memorization.”

If you’re talking science in general, physics and chemistry will first come to mind, and there’s a tendency to lump it in with math, but I can say definitively that the sciences in high school entrance exams are memorization subjects. It’s true that there are problems you use math for, like with springs or the tilt of stars, or when they want the mass of compounds, but that’s only ever tested at a very, very elementary level. As long as you memorize how to derive it, you just have to mechanically plug in the values.

All right, so assuming we just give up on Japanese, now there’s no problem with those two subjects, I thought, looking over at Komachi, but she wouldn’t look me in the eye. *H-huh? What’s wrong, dear sister?*

And then, with a somehow resigned sigh, Komachi muttered, “…English.”

“Memorization again.”

For the English on high school entrance exams, you just have to memorize all the vocab and idioms and grammar, and you’re basically okay. It’s an awful way to study, but you’ll ace entrance exams like that, unfortunately. It’s pretty weird for school education to be like that. You’ll never be able to speak English when you learn it like this—seriously, you can’t expect to hold a conversation with foreigners. I can’t even hold a real conversation with Japanese people, and it’s my native language. What does the Ministry of Culture think about that?

Komachi wasn’t listening to me anymore. She was just fooling with Kamakura, poking him in the forehead.

“Um, Komachi?”

“Oh, you’re done? Then next is math,” she asked me in a rather offhand manner.

However, despite all my peerless accomplishments thus far, this was the one thing I didn't have a good answer for. "…Math, huh? I can't help you there."

That 9 percent in math and bottom rank in my year aren't just for show here. And, like, what's up with the word *mathematics*? Doesn't it kinda sound like *masochistic*?

"You're useless…huh, Kaa?" Komachi said as she petted Kamakura, and the cat huffed.

USE—LESS?!

Here I was trying to help her out a bit, and this is the thanks I get. And she was giving me this rather unimpressed look, too…

"Well, this is you, Bro, so Komachi knew that… It's okay—Komachi doesn't mind that you're just being nice without actually helping. And that was worth a lot of Komachi points," she said kindly, with a look of pity and affection, adding in some points just as a part of the flow. Although I do think it would have been cute without the points, even her shrewd calculating is charming to me these days, unfortunately.

Taking Kamakura in her arms, that cute little Komachi turned to me. "But, like, I'm impressed you got into Soubu when your math is a mess."

"Yeah, you have a point…"

In middle school, I devoted a fair amount of time to studying math, but I've never been any good at it. Once I got into high school and realized that humanities university looked easy, I immediately stopped bothering with it. For regular tests, they'll let you move on to the next grade if you just do retests and take extra lessons, after all.

If I need to do it, I'll do it, and if I don't need to, then I won't.

People are all like that. Life is just a constant stream of unpleasantries, and therefore, being alive is unpleasant, but you can't just give up on living.

So then how to deal with it? How to smoothly sidestep the unpleasantries? If you consider what you have to do to accomplish that goal, the answer emerges on its own. And studying methods are just the same thing.

Basically, that was the way I approached dealing with math.

"You know, there's a way to do things even when you're struggling," I said.

And now Komachi eagerly scooted up to my side. "Ohhh, do

tell."

Despite her question, though, it wasn't that big of a deal… Well, whatever.

This was really the basics of the basics, the elementary of the elementary, but maybe when you're really stuck, going back to the basics is a part of the process.

I figured I'd give her a brief explanation. "There's no point in forcing yourself to do something you don't understand. The major problems, you just sort of tackle based on intuition, while you answer the other stuff perfectly. Long story short, you abandon some of the questions. The success rate for difficult problems is lower than the rest, so you skip them and eliminate errors in the places where you can manage. That's basically it."

To resign yourself from square one: That's the key.

But still, this sort of methodology is something you absorb from taking tests normally, and, well, consciously adopting that strategy might be somewhat effective.

I thought this was pretty standard advice, but when I looked at Komachi, she smiled and softly, dramatically wiped away fake tears. "Bro, that's the sort of advice Komachi wanted from the start…" If she was pretending to cry, that must mean she accepted it. Well, if something like that would solve her concerns, that was fine.

My long speech had dried out my throat, so I moistened it with coffee. In that same moment, Komachi also brought her cup to her lips.

Then she lifted her face and glanced at me. "But you should still be doing it properly now, though."

That was indeed a very reasonable view. Someone who doesn't practice what they preach won't sound very convincing.

But the world has many things that can't be resolved or explained with logic.

So I just said one thing: "I…abandoned my future in math…"

"The way you said that was so cool! It's like you gave up on your dreams!" Komachi's eyes were sparkling.

"Right? It's like I abandoned baseball because of an injury but couldn't leave it behind entirely, and I'll eventually come back to the diamond, right?"

"Yeah, it's about as cool as, like, if your right arm's broken, then you go with your left, and if that's broken, you switch to

batter!”

Oh, really, it was that cool? That’s major-league coolness, huh?

“Ha-ha-ha!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Komachi and I both laughed… What’s with this eccentric family?

Maybe it was the late-night excitement talking, but both of us were laughing over the dumbest stuff. And then the way things suddenly got quiet after that passed was also particular to the late hour.

Our laughter faded, and Komachi and I both drank our coffee in silence.

“That reminds me, what about getting a recommendation?” I asked her. “Weren’t you on the student council?” I didn’t know exactly where Komachi’s scholastic abilities were at this point, but based on her typical test scores, she was far from getting in. Wondering if there wasn’t some other way, I hit on something: I seemed to recall Komachi had been on student council. I think she’d said something to that effect in the car on the way to camp during summer vacation.

And being on student council would be a pretty juicy position, what with the favor from teachers and recommendations for schools. I mean, like, it seems to me about half the people on student council in middle school are after that. The other half of them have this aspiration because of manga or anime, and then when they actually try it, they get disappointed that the experience is nothing like what they expected.

“You’re an idiot, so wouldn’t it be better for you to get recommendations and stuff rather than betting it on the one shot of victory in exams?” I said.

Komachi smiled boldly. “Heh-heh-heh. Bro… Komachi is an idiot, so she gets bad grades at school, you know?”

Why the heck does she sound so proud…? I thought, exasperated.

Komachi must have hurt herself by saying that out loud, as she clutched her chest with a moan. “So I don’t have the grades for it…” And then she broke down sobbing.

Uh, you brought that on yourself. And you were already after the recommendation, huh…?

But the Hikigaya way is to not look back on the past and mope. I’ve abandoned much of my own past, too. Of course, Komachi

being the Ultimate Communication Weapon of the Hikigaya household, she's also certainly inherited that trait.

Snapping her head up, with a nonchalant look as if nothing had happened, she continued talking totally normal. "You did good on regular tests, too, Bro—you should have tried to get a recommendation."

"Heh, you fool. I had a bad attitude in class, and the teachers don't like me. So I never even considered it." For some reason, I said that triumphantly, too. It seemed that some of the mysterious late-night energy was still lingering inside me.

Komachi nod-nodded. "Hmmmm, I see," she murmured, as if this convinced her.

Hmm, I dunno about that attitude, though? Big Bro might be feeling a little hurt.

But of course she would accept this. That stuff about my attitude in class and teachers' impressions of me went without saying, but I was also terrible outside of the core classes. Even if I scraped by on tests for the five main subjects, for the rest of them—gym, art, music, shop, and home economics—that wouldn't work. It's a totally evil system where the teachers' pets win. And then when those teachers are the advisors for specific clubs, they'll blatantly favor club members and be super-lenient in their assessment of cute girls and students they like. I was not enough of a devil survivor to survive that sort of environment, so I'd wound up basically abandoning all four of those subjects, too.

There was also the fact that Soubu High School was a prep school for university, and if you wanted to get in through recommendation, your total for all nine subjects needed to be at least 40. If you got a 5 in all nine, that's 45, so it's a pretty high bar.

Well, I'd never even considered getting a recommendation. Rather than conducting yourself flawlessly for two and a half years and worrying about the numbers on your report card, it's more efficient to kill yourself studying for half a year.

I learned that just as art quality is not what makes or breaks an anime, the numbers on a report card can only do so much against entrance exams!

Basically, the destination is more important than the journey.

"Well, you just have to get the points on the exam. Do your best." She was a little far away for a shoulder pat, so I lightly raised my mug.

Komachi responded with a slight raise of her own mug. “Yeah, Komachi will.”

I was saying some pretty stupid stuff, but if this could get her even a little bit more motivated, then that would be enough…

Well, I guess I’ll lie around awhile and read until I fall asleep. I tossed back the rest of my coffee, then circled around to the kitchen to leave my mug in the sink. “Then I’m going to b—”

The instant I started to speak, Komachi shot up. “Yeaaah! Komachi’s going for it, Bro!”

“Huh? To do what?” A night battle? Is it a night battle? Big Bro was planning to go to bed now, though…

As if to say *Sheesh, you kids*, Kamakura yawned, then stretched wide and left the living room.

X X X

The table was piled with reference books and problem collections from past exams. The short hand on the clock had already passed the top, but it seemed Komachi still planned to keep studying.

There was a set of study tools here that she’d brought all the way from her room. Eyeing them, I poured my second cup of coffee that night.

Komachi was looking like she’d hit peak motivation, gripping her mechanical pencil tight. “Bro, Komachi realized. Like with that math test before, there really is a way to study.”

“Oh-ho, that’s some serious progress.” In fact, I wondered why she’d never grasped that until now, but maybe everyone was this way. After all, at school we learn the subjects, but we don’t necessarily learn stuff like how to study or how to take notes. Maybe, when everyone’s all taking the same classes, it’s this discovery that separates the wheat from the chaff.

So now Komachi had reached the trial-and-error stage.

“There’s actually a way to memorize things, too, isn’t there?” she asked.

I thought back on my study methods. Yeah, I had an idea as to that. But some people might find my idea kind of creepy, so I really didn’t want to say it…

“Well, there is, but it’s tailored for me. I don’t know if that style

will work for you, too."

"No, it will!" She could declare that with full confidence, for some reason.

Though I'd waffled a little and given her an ambiguous answer, if she was gonna be like that, I couldn't keep it from her. When she looked straight at me with those sparkling eyes full of hope, I just had to tell her… "The way you do it…is through association."

"Be specific!" she demanded.

O-okay… What are you, my boss? If I'm gonna explain stuff or do a presentation, I have to think it through first, or I can't explain myself…

I picked up a nearby history book and flipped through it. "Okay… For example, world history, here." I opened it to a section on modern history.

Sliding her chair over, Komachi came up beside me. She was near enough that our elbows touched, and her face was super-close. *She's kinda in the way, and it makes it hard to explain this… But it's fine.*

"With history, you learn it as a course of events."

"Ohhh, a course of events, huh?" Komachi repeated the words like she didn't really understand them. People often say to remember things that way, but they don't explain in detail how specifically to do it, so maybe the concept is difficult to grasp.

I cleared my throat with a *hmm*. Once my voice was ready, I began speaking in a smooth, low tone. "Once, a long time ago, there lived Ms. America and Ms. USSR…"

"Huh? Wait, what's this about, Bro?" Komachi stared at me as she jerked away in abject horror. She even pushed her chair away. She was recoiling so hard, I could hear her thoughts: *Where's this coming from? Ew.*

You jerk… I'm trying to explain this for you… "Just shut up and listen. I'm telling you how to remember stuff."

"O-okay…" Komachi stretched her back, then turned to me with a serious look. But she didn't scoot up to me again, making her big bro a little sad.

Attempting to smother my sadness, I continued in a tearful voice. "Ms. USSR is levelheaded and beautiful, while Ms. America is high-energy and cute. And they're both bitches."

"They are?"

"Indeed," I declared, but, well, I was just assigning them

character traits, so it didn't really matter. If I'm erased by the CIA or the KGB, then you can assume this statement was the cause.

The point was the story these two bitches wove together—what came next.

"The two of them were in the same class, and rivals competing to be the most popular. They both wanted to be on top, so they had spats every so often."

"That stuff's pretty common…"

It's common, huh…? Girls are so scary. I'd meant to hide my shock, but my voice may have shaken a bit as I spoke. "…I guess. But if they were to be openly antagonistic to one another, people would notice—well, let's say boys would notice. So that made things difficult. So Ms. USSR and Ms. America have a sophisticated information war, harass each other a bit, and, like, they create cliques to battle each other, basically."

"Information war and harassment…," Komachi murmured with deep emotion.

"That's right. They were saying things like *I hear that girl is dating that college boy at her work* or *She wouldn't say hi to me* or Nanoha*'s sold out.* Stuff like that."

"Yeah, you see that a lot…"

That's common, too? Enough, I'm not gonna think about what kids in Komachi's class are talking about. Concentrate on the explanation, come on.

"That was a conflict between communist and capitalist nations, what's called the Cold War."

It seemed that term was familiar to her, as she nodded. If she was getting it so far, then it should be okay to move to the next part. "So as they're having this dispute, Ms. USSR and Ms. America both hold big secrets that could lead to each other's destruction. They both have a hold on each other's weaknesses. What do you think happens?"

"They can't just mess with each other…"

"That's right. She might be able to destroy her enemy, but then the inevitable retaliation would cripple her beyond any hope of recovery. If that were to happen, there's a very real possibility the class would fall apart. In real life, those secrets were nuclear bombs and stuff."

When both parties have a grasp on a means to destroy the other and are clearly aware of that, it's called *mutually assured destruction*.

“That’s basically it.”

“Ohhh… I feel like I get it, but also I kinda don’t.”

Though I’d finished my little speech on the Cold War, Komachi’s reaction wasn’t the greatest. But the important thing here wasn’t what the Cold War was about—the issue was how she would remember things.

“Well, I just explained it in a really basic way. You can anthropomorphize things or whatever, but for history, just remember it as a kind of story. The way you memorize things is to create a framework for it, then flesh it out with details. Just trying to remember a bunch of words isn’t very efficient.”

If you learn it like this, then you can even explain things for essay responses, and you can just bang out answers one after another. That’s my recommended study method. Although there’s no one but Komachi for me to recommend it to.

Komachi’s mouth was open like *Huhhh*, but it seemed my wisdom was gradually sinking in, and she gave me a little nod. “So basically, you novelize your textbook!”

“That’s the gist. But my way isn’t the only right way, so you should figure out what works for you.”

Upon finishing my explanation, I yawned, thinking I’d be able to go to my room and lie down this time for sure. But through my watering eyes, I could see a blurry Komachi going straight to scribbling something down with her pen.

“Well,” I said, “I guess I’ll stick around for a little longer.”

The sound of her mechanical pencil running across paper rang through the quiet room. Pages turned, her eraser rubbed, and occasionally there was the squeak of a marker’s cap twisting off.

“Will Komachi get in…?” she asked, hands never stopping.

“Dunno… But I hope you do.”

It wasn’t an answer to her question. It was just a hope.

Even if she did go to the same school as me, I doubt she’d bother involving herself with me there—that was how it had been in elementary and middle school. I’m not the kind of family Komachi can brag about. I might brag about my little sister, but she couldn’t brag about me to anyone.

There’s no advantage or necessity to us going to the same high school, but if that’s what Komachi wants, then so be it.

Komachi’s hand paused in her writing, and she looked up from her notebook. Her eyes appeared to be focused on something

looming in the near future. "…Yeah. There's stuff I wanna do, too."

"Stuff you wanna do? Like clubs and stuff?" I asked.

Komachi paused, momentarily considering. "Hmm… Well, more or less."

"What club are you gonna join?" I asked.

It seemed she wasn't going to tell me, though. "Tee-hee, that's a secret," she said, winking with her pointer finger up. It was an irritatingly cute gesture.

But no matter what club she would join, there was something I should tell her, just in case. "Just don't join the Service Club. We don't even know how long it's gonna last."

"Huh? Really?" Komachi stared at me with surprise. Her smile and lighthearted cheer faded.

All that remained was the midnight quiet.

I took a swig of coffee to wash down whatever had caught in my throat. Once it was safely contained, I opened my mouth. "I don't even know how long I'm gonna be in it, and the same goes for Yuigahama. I don't know about Yukinoshita, though… So if something happens, I'm sure it'll just evaporate."

The club had only three people. And we were already in our second year. Unlike with sports clubs, there was no clear retirement period, but that time could only exist until we graduated. And time isn't the only reason those relationships could crumble.

Komachi reached out for her coffee and took a drink. Then she made a bitter expression. "Bro…what do you mean, 'something'?"

"…I dunno." I smiled and dodged the question.

I think I'd already realized it. I was well aware of it.

Yukino Yukinoshita, Hachiman Hikigaya, Yui Yuigahama—the club composed of just these three people would eventually come to an end. With our different positions, environments, and personalities, our relationships would eventually fall apart.

This wasn't a phenomenon limited to just us three; the connections between people are fundamentally fragile. Probably far more fragile than I feel they are.

Before I knew it, my gaze had dropped to my coffee. The surface of the black liquid wobbled with unsteady ripples, reflecting an even darker pair of eyes.

"Bro?" Komachi said.

I answered automatically. "I'm listening. So what'd you say?"

"No you're not…," she said, exasperated. However, she quickly

energized herself again, gripping her mechanical pencil tight. “It’s like, you know, Komachi has to do her best and get into Soubu!”

“Well, whatever. Do your best.” Suppressing the smile that threatened to slip out, I drank the contents of my mug.

Hachiman & Zaimokuza texting one day

Preparing for the Chibattle is a hassle.

…Huh? This is sudden…

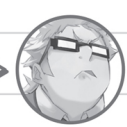
Nobody wants to spare the personnel. This event could be way simpler.

…Hepumf. Thy texting skills are sorely lacking… Even I find it awkward. You must first check if I have time, then put a "?" at the end, or it's indubitably difficult to reply.

What's with that advice? It's like you got that from googling "how to text a girl." Not like I care. Anyway, I just want to get this costume stuff under control.

Herm, but I don't really know anything about cosplay.

Then whatever. Bye.



Don't give up so fast! If costs must be reduced, then one must consider it from the design stage before making them.

Oh yeah, so can you make them?

Gerbkomf, bold of you to assume I can make anything just because I am an *otaku*. I cannot make costumes, I cannot draw, and I truly know naught about trains. I cannot even manage the settings on my computer properly… So then why does my lady mother keep asking me such things? And when I tell her I know not, she looks upon me with such scorn…

Well, that's what moms are like. Guess it'd be faster to ask someone who can make them.

I only hope such a personage exists.

I have an idea. I don't know if she'll listen, though.

Oh-ho, there is such a one? Whomst?

It's like, Kawa-something… I guess it was Kawauchi?

Kawauchi…the light cruiser? Seems the type to enjoy night battles…

Close enough. Anyway, submit a simplified plan within the week. Thanks.

Aye, m'lord! …Herm? By the way, are you serious when you say this week?

Ahoy-hoooy! Hmm? This is odd…? It's Friday night now, though…?

5

Based on the aforementioned, **Hachiman Hikigaya** has a hunch.

There were more people around than usual in the classroom at lunch. Those who'd gone out to buy their lunches were all filtering back into the room, too. I was one of those people.

I pulled my pastries from their paper bags and spread them out on my desk. Normally, I'd eat my lunch someplace I could feel free and at ease, but not today.

Water streaked along the window, raindrops hitting the veranda railing.

It had started raining that morning, and it neither grew heavier nor petered out—it just kept drizzling steadily down. Watching the half-assed shower made me feel kind of cold.

But inside the classroom was even more bleak.

At the front of the classroom, the air was so heavy, you might think the rain had blown in. It looked like another showing of *The Tragedy of Sagamin* was open to rave reviews. With a seat in the front half of the classroom, I got a good view.

It seemed there was a new show on the program: *My Crush Suddenly Asked Me to, So I Wound Up Sports Festival Committee Chair, and There's Some Obnoxious People, and They Were Saying Stuff About Me Again, You Know*. That's a long title. How do you abbreviate that?

There was Sagami with a particularly morose expression, and sitting opposite her was some girl from our class, and then there was one other girl who was standing at her side with concern.

"They wouldn't come out and say it, but they basically told me to just quit…"

“What? That’s pretty mean.”

I could feel them glancing over at me just for an instant. *C’mon, don’t steal glances at me, or I’ll think you have a crush on me.*

The capacity to detect looks of derision and scorn comes standard for loners. Loners are essentially those who make the world the enemy; for them, daily life itself a battlefield. Therefore, they gain such skills to protect their own life and spirit. It’s just like how a master can sense the presence of another or nearby hostile intent. Or I guess it’s a little different. Yeah, it’s different.

If you know it’s coming, then you can break the fall. It was just like the rain falling outside right at that moment. If you know it’s raining, you can bring an umbrella. Although you’ll get wet whether or not you have one.

“I wasn’t doing a very good job handling things, though, so it’s my fault. But, like…”

“Nooo, that’s not true! The one at fault here is…”

The Sagamin low-pressure front—otherwise known as a depression—continued to whip around and gather force. Its damage was spreading to other regions as well, attacking passersby.

“Ohhh man, this rain sucks! Everything was dripping wet in front of the school store.”

The one to get caught there was Tobe. It seemed he’d lost some game and been made to go buy everyone lunch, as his arms were full of pastries. When he came strolling in from the front of the classroom in his usual flippant manner, he was caught in the indoor cyclone.

“Oh, hey, Tobe, did you hear about what happened?”

“Huh? What, what, what happened?” The paper bags in his arms crinkled as Tobe perked up his ears.

The girl quietly leaned in close to Tobe.

…Huh? She’s blushing a little—it’s not that she actually has a crush on him or something really dumb like that, is it? Damn you, Tobe…

As I was glaring at him with murderous eyes, Tobe jerked back and smacked himself in the forehead. “Whoa! Geez, figures. Hikitani’s nuts, for real!”

“H-hey! Tobe, you’re too loud…”

I’d thought for sure this would lead to the sudden start of the *Tobe Love Story* theatrical release, but such concerns of mine were clearly misplaced, and the subject was me after all. *I’m the center of conversation here? Damn, I’m so popular.*

“Man, that’s wild. I mean, Hikitani can be like that, though. Like, just a while ago…”

Ugh, and now they’ve dug up that old stuff again… Stop talking about the same stuff over and over again… Well, if you pull something once, people will keep bringing it up forever, and you just gotta deal. But if you talk about the same thing too many times, then you might find your own social status dropping, you know?

It looked like Tobe was ready to jump right into that conversation as he dropped the bags of pastries on the desk.

…Is that okay? Didn’t your friends ask you to go buy those? I wondered, and I was soon proven right by the *click-click* ing sound of nails tapping on a desk. A high-pressure system was heading directly for the center of this cyclone.

Glancing behind me, I saw Miura was irritated. Deep in the slight glare of her eyes, I thought I could see a blazing flame. *You’re really scary, man…*

“H-heeey! Tobecchi, hurry, hurry!” Yuigahama beckoned him, sensing that Miura was in a mood.

Noticing that, Tobe waved back at her. “Oh, coming! …Sorry, they’re calling for me, so I’ve gotta go,” he said, and the depression clique easily released Tobe.

“Oh, okay.”

Maybe they didn’t care about speaking to Tobe, and anyone would do. Or was she keeping her mouth shut because she could see Miura behind him? Well, it could be either, which got Miura even more irritated.

“Sorry!” Tobe said, setting up all the pastries, and Hayama and their group were all like, *Oh, hey, thanks, nice*, while Miura was narrowing her eyes in displeasure.

“That took a while,” she said without trying to hide her ill humor, but in the process of choosing her snack, her mood improved somewhat. She picked up a chocolate cornet and chuckled triumphantly. Maybe she was just hungry?

But I couldn’t be looking off elsewhere forever. I mean, Yuigahama kinda seemed concerned and was glancing over at me.

Guess I’ll eat my stuff quick and hole up in the library.

X X X

When I exited the classroom that lunch break, the hallway was bustling.

It was noisier than usual, maybe because people couldn't go outside like they wanted. Nobody was gonna play tag in the halls, of course (although we did have a contingent of idiots who might get carried away), but the kids coming and going from the classrooms were energetic.

Every time I passed the doorway of a second-year classroom, I could sense eyes following me. Together with the humidity, the barely withheld snickers as I passed were the most uncomfortable thing.

It seems there's a tendency for students in this school to erroneously believe that once you've met with criticism one time, they're allowed to bash you openly. Standing out is bad, and when bad stands out, it's their duty to target you.

The important thing here is not to cater to or give into it. As long as you don't acknowledge a loss, then it isn't a loss, and if you don't make a problem a problem, then it won't be one. The very moment you acknowledge defeat is when you get hit the hardest. Thanks to a prevalent belief that justice prevails, those who lose will be branded as bad—and you can attack bad as much as you like.

That's the rule of school society.

You may attack those of low status, the failures, the loathed. That's how school is—you're constantly being judged. All are plaintiffs and all are accused. The prosecution, defense, and jury are all the same group. And the judge who makes the verdict is also the masses. Ultimately, we are continuously tied by the concept of "everyone."

I doubt the day will ever come when we're freed from that.

The normie tendency to gleefully hang out with others may actually be a countermeasure to avoid that judgment. I've come to suspect that's a precautionary measure taken to prevent people from talking bad about them behind their backs.

While ignoring the eyes following me and occasionally returning glares to intimidate them, I arrived at the first-floor vending machines. Before going to the library, I had to buy a postprandial coffee.

My hand was going straight for the button when I heard light footsteps from behind. It seemed someone else, like me, had come

to buy a drink.

I took the Max can from the machine and quickly moved out of the way. I know I'm good at not getting in the way.

But I didn't hear the footsteps come forward.

What, are they afraid to even come a step closer to me? I wondered, and I turned around.

Whereupon I saw the one in question, Hayato Hayama, smiling uncomfortably.

He nodded casually at me as if just checking that I wasn't going to say anything, then went for the vending machine. His fingers hesitated on which to pick before buying a black coffee. *Oh, he's buying a coffee that's not MAX in front of me—is he picking a fight?*

He popped open the tab with a *spritz*, and even what he said next was kind of inflammatory. "…Sounds like things aren't going very well."

"Huh?"

That statement was on a vague line between trying to start a fight and admonishing me, but if you knew how much he tries to avoid conflict, you could tell this was sincere concern. He was probably talking about the sports festival. He'd roped Sagami into this for us, so it wouldn't be strange for him to be aware of what was going on.

"People always fight when you put them in a group."

This was something that I—No, I think Hayama would probably recognize this maxim, too. With impromptu groups like these committees in particular, it was less common for everyone to be all buddy-buddy. The more people you have, the more quarrels you get.

And I told Hayama as much with a slight hint of mockery for bringing it up this late in the game. He didn't smile. "That's not what I mean. I mean with the class."

I'd thought for sure he was talking about the Sports Festival Committee, but it seemed not. By "with the class," did that mean he was talking about Sagami? Was he concerned about her, like Miura was?

Not that it made a difference.

"The answer's still the same."

That ultimately didn't change the root of the problem. Essentially, the only point was whether she could get along with people. Relationships are a pain in the ass, after all. Whether that's

in the macro or the micro, it makes no big difference in what you do.

This is why I could say the same thing for both cases.

"Once things go sour, you can never go back," I said.

He didn't seem satisfied by my answer. Instead of raising his open can of coffee to his lips, he just gave me this accusatory look. "…You think?"

"Yeah, I do," I said flatly. I was turning around to go back to the classroom when I heard his voice from behind.

"I'm sorry about the sports festival."

"What?"

I turned to see Hayama's gaze slightly lowered. "This is happening because I recommended Sagami without thinking it through…"

"Oh, we'd already decided to make her do it anyway. Even if we hadn't asked you, we'd have found a way. You actually helped us by saving us trouble. So it's got nothing to do with you, really." Intervening in anything he sees that resembles a quarrel is kind of Hayato Hayama's nature. We'd made use of it, and now here we were. That's it. It didn't make sense for him to apologize to me.

"But I agreed to do it. If there's something I can help with, I will, so let me know."

"O-okay…"

But despite his offer, this would need more than "something."

Or so I was about to say, but Hayama picked up on that and offered a charming smile. "I've heard some things from my club."

Uh-huh, so it's already gotten spread around, huh?

But this was a more serious blow than I'd thought.

Perhaps due to the character of its captain, the soccer club was on the gentler side. And even the soccer club, led by the absolute charisma that is Hayama, was in a bad place.

So things would be even worse in the other clubs. They could well become even more uncooperative from here on out. Talking behind someone's back both engenders a sense of unity and solidifies opinions so that people persist in them more stubbornly. By gaining agreement and consensus, it entrenches them.

One option here would be to pull the Hayama card.

By winning over influencers like Hayama and the soccer club, we could manage the sports festival without a hitch.

But that might help further Hayama's reputation, not Sagami's.

It would bring about the same results as Yukinoshita righting the ship during the cultural festival as the de facto chair… Still, Sagami herself would probably be glad to have Hayama helping her.

But that would upset Miura even more, and then if Sagami backed away in deference to Miura, the class atmosphere would sink into a deflationary spiral. If it turned into a standoff instead, that'd be a pain, too…

No, hold on here. I could be certain the committee would dislike Sagami even more if she got help from Hayama, so it was very plausible they'd oppose us even harder…

Both Hayama and Yukinoshita were certainly wild cards, but hard to use. This time, we had to move around the pawns, keeping Sagami at the center.

While I was working out simulations of people's actions like a chess problem, I heard a confused-sounding voice.

"Is something wrong?" Hayama shot me a questioning look at my sudden silence.

"Oh, no… Well, you know. I bet it'll be fine, so you don't need to worry."

"…All right."

"I'll let you know if anything comes up. See you," I declared, then spun around to go.

Hayama seemed like he still wanted to say something, but he realized I wasn't going to listen. Instead, he silently raised a hand.

I strode swiftly down the hall.

Hayama was an excellent trump card against Sagami and also against the crew of the committee, but I couldn't use him on both parties simultaneously. Now that Sagami and the crew were in opposition, you couldn't make use of Hayama's peacekeeping skills for both sides. In fact, it would sow new seeds of conflict.

First, I had to do something about the conflict between Sagami and the crew.

And to that end, I'd decided on the move I would make at the meeting that day. I considered myself basically prepared.

But even so…

Once things go sour, you can never go back.

My own words stuck like a knot in my chest.

X X X

Every set of footsteps coming into the meeting room was heavy.

Considering where we were when we'd ended the last time, that was no surprise. One day isn't going to erase that discomfort—in fact, you'd still be distilling it in your own head.

That meant the participation rate was slightly lower than the day before, and there were a lot of people who came in just barely on time, or late.

Accordingly, the meeting started five minutes behind schedule.

Meguri, who'd been staring intently at the door the whole time, glanced over at the clock. "Sagami, I think we could get started about now…but do you have a minute, first?"

"…Yeah," Sagami replied, but she didn't quite get up.

"I-I'll go with you…" Yuigahama started to get up, perhaps to prompt her, but Yukinoshita grabbed her hand to keep her here. Yuigahama reluctantly sat back down again.

That was for the best.

What Sagami was about to do was an act of ritual purification. No one else should be getting involved. The shame of being seen during this would be unbearable for Sagami.

Sagami blew out a deep, deep sigh, then stood with resolve. If she waited any longer, then one of us would wind up being witness to it. I'm sure she wanted to avoid that. Her pride—or maybe her vanity—was a quiet thing.

Her steps were fast, considering how slowly she'd stood up. She headed for the back of the meeting room, where the central figures of the crew were sitting.

There were the aforementioned Haruka and Yukko.

They shot Sagami looks as she walked up to them. Were those looks of contempt, or scorn? Or maybe just curiosity.

Sagami was going to tell them the reason she'd come here.

"Um, do you have a minute?" When she addressed Haruka and Yukko, the two of them looked at one another. After an instantaneous conference via eye contact, they both looked up at Sagami.

"Sure, but…now?"

"We can't do it later?" they asked back at her.

Highly aware of all the people around her, Sagami took a steady breath. "…Now would be best," she said, and this time, the girls answered without sharing a glance.

"Then…go ahead."

“The meeting’s about to start, so we can talk here, right?”

When the girl smoothly added a condition, Sagami’s words caught in her throat. “…Huh?”

A ripple of nearly inaudible snickers escaped from Haruka and Yukko’s group of friends.

Meanwhile, the others in the meeting room deliberately maintained silence. They just listened closely, without saying a word.

This was her purification ritual—and her punishment.

With all eyes watching, blushing to her ears with shame, Sagami’s shoulders trembled slightly.

But nevertheless, she managed to put one word after another. “Um, I’m sorry… I wanted things to be fun, so I wasn’t thinking about anything else…,” she apologized.

Haruka and Yukko, plus everyone else, listened in silence to her fragile voice.

This was verging on public shaming.

But someone who stands in an exposed position will be the target. It’s the rule of society that when something bad happens, it’s okay to attack and grind down and sneer at the person who occupies the top position. Hence the demand for Sagami to talk here.

Had Sagami’s apology satisfied their desire?

Haruka or Yukko (I don’t know which) awkwardly fiddled with her hands a bit as she opened her mouth. “…It’s fine. We weren’t thinking about anything but our club, so we were at fault, too.”

The crowd from the sports clubs seemed to be on the same page. They were quiet, but there were a few distinct *yeah*s and *uh-huh*s.

Maybe Sagami heard that, as her words gradually evened out. “Yeah…um, so… I really do want to make this a good time, and I want to work hard at it. So it’d help a bunch if you could work with me… Oh, of course, I’ll try to make sure we don’t overburden the clubs,” she said, firmly raising her chin. In response, the crew members averted their eyes just slightly instead.

But nevertheless, her intent reached them enough to earn her a reply.

“…Yeah, we’ll do what we can, too.”

“Thanks. I’ll be counting on you.” Sagami bobbed her head, and that seemed to end the conversation, as she turned around and

came back to us.

Meguri breathed a sigh of relief as she watched the situation come to a close. “That’s that, then.” She turned back to me with a bright smile, and it kept me from doing anything but nod.

“…Yeah.” But as the word rose in my throat, I had to choke down an uneasy discomfort like a little fish bone stuck in my chest.

If you were just looking at the surface, then it had indeed been wrapped up. In terms of the formal protocol, it was easy to assume this was resolved.

But if you looked a little deeper, a number of things came into view.

This is a bad habit of mine.

What Sagami had said sounded like an attempt to save herself and even blaming them by showing how her position was justified, while Haruka’s and Yukko’s apologies just sounded like a formality with no actual promises made, using their club activities as a shield.

It was awful to picture.

However, assuming the worst of a situation usually means you’re right. I’m right so often that occasionally I get deluded into thinking I have the power to see the future.

As I sincerely prayed to be wrong for once, I quietly waited for the meeting to start.

X X X

After waiting for the arrival of latecomers, the meeting began.

Under the watchful eye of Miss Hiratsuka, the first to open her mouth was Meguri. With what had just happened, maybe she felt uneasy about suddenly leaving it to Sagami.

“All right, then let’s begin the meeting. First, we’ve come up with an improved plan since the other day. Yukinoshita, can I ask you to give us the rundown?” she said, and Yukinoshita stood.

“Of course.” Yukinoshita glanced over at the others of the student council, and then they swooped into action. It seemed that, at some point, they’d become absolutely obedient to her.

The student council gave everyone printouts. Yukinoshita, with those same printouts in hand, began to explain. “Concerning scheduling with clubs, we’ve created a rotation of shifts from now

until the day of the event. We have taken all the club tournaments into account, so please take a look."

A stir of confused murmurs rose from the crew, who'd been looking over the sheets as they listened. It seemed something here was unexpected, and they were taken aback.

Well, depending on how you looked at it, it could seem like she'd decided this for them arbitrarily. But we were ready for that.

"Um, this plan is to fix things, so if there are any more issues, we'll make adjustments. We've explained this to the club captains, and I don't think it should be too tough…" Yuigahama swiftly came in to back up Yukinoshita. Since she was associated with the upper caste, everyone would know she could easily coordinate with the captains of all the clubs.

That kept anyone from voicing anything resembling a complaint… Although, I'm sure Yukinoshita assumed this matter was already settled.

"And also, regarding the Chibattle, we will amend some of the rules and simplify the costumes to reduce the burden. This way, we can expect a reduction in the work required, so we should be able to manage with fewer man-hours than the goal brought up at the meeting the other day." Yukinoshita calmly continued with her explanation.

What the heck is a man-hour? Is that the hour after you come back late at night from a day of grueling, unpaid overtime to watch old recordings of *PreCure* and cry? Mmm. Maybe not.

This explanation of hers not only didn't give them any choice here—it was close to a threat.

The shift sheet Yukinoshita had made up very courteously included a comparison with the old one. I couldn't tell if she was a fast worker or if she'd just had the extra time. Probably both. In all likelihood, she'd included it to prevent the crew from arguing their way out of this, so I'd add her twisted personality to that list of reasons why no one could get out of this.

Still, it worked, and the crew decided to comply.

After scanning the dead-silent meeting room, Yukinoshita took a seat. It seemed she meant to leave the rest to the chair.

Picking up on her intent, Meguri prompted Sagami. "Then continuing from the other day…"

"R-right. So then we'll be assigning tasks based on this schedule…"

Watching as Sagami lead the meeting, I quietly rested my chin on my hand.

We'd planned things out to this point. We'd adjusted the schedule, which had been the issue during the meeting, and coordinated with the captains of all the sports clubs. We'd also proposed cost cuts for the Chibattle, which seemed like the most labor-intensive task, and we'd also arranged the reconciliation between Sagami and the core figures of the crew, Haruka and Yukko.

In the current situation, there was nothing else for me to do, and this should be enough of a fix to make a recovery.

But still, my eyes moved of their own accord, trying to weed out every single element of uncertainty.

My powers of imagination always suppose the worst and never sleep.

It's less to avoid such situations and more to soften the shock when the inevitable blow occurs. Which is rather sad, if I do say so myself.

I mean, the pain when you know ahead of time versus when it's a surprise is different, right? You aren't affected as much if you have the sense that it wasn't gonna work anyway, certainly not as much as when you're feeling confident and get totally crushed. If you can keep the damage to a minimum, it won't take long to recover, either. This is life wisdom.

In the meeting room, the labor was solemnly allotted. From what I could see, there weren't any really big problems.

Sagami was managing things smoothly, and Meguri was by her side. And with Miss Hiratsuka's watchful eye from the edge of the room, no one would cause any fuss.

Superficially, it seemed as if there were no quarrels to be had.

But nevertheless, I spotted that one moment.

When Haruka and Yukko came forward to write their names on the whiteboard, their faces went blank right when they passed by Sagami. And then after they'd passed her, they sort of nodded at each other.

"Hey…"

"Yeah…"

I could hear them whispering. Maybe they'd been talking about other things, too, but I couldn't know about that.

Well, they had just apologized. It was unlikely that the

awkwardness hanging between them would disappear right away.

I abandoned any further observation or speculation, leaning back in my chair until it creaked, and I stretched my back.

When I leaned back far enough to nearly fall over, I saw the world upside down.

All I could see were the droplets streaking over the window behind me. The rain had yet to stop.

X X X

Some time had passed since the meeting the other day, and the committee was functional now.

Though if you were to ask if things were going smoothly, the answer was, not quite. We'd come up with a shift schedule, but the labor efficiency had actually gone down.

It's a fantasy to think that nailing down shifts and a schedule will make everyone operate according to plan.

We're not machines. Sometimes we don't feel well; sometimes we're sleepy. Sudden plans will come up, and there are times when we'll just kind of flake out, too. That's why you put in a certain amount of buffer when you assemble shifts and schedules. I'm sure Yukinoshita had, in fact, done that.

But still, there are things you can't make up for.

Shifts are basically an establishment of roles. It's a promise and an oath in a way, and it's also a limitation that states once your role has been decided, you'll absolutely not do any more—you don't have to go beyond.

In conclusion, having laid out a complete division of labor had, paradoxically, unfortunately fixed a ceiling on their labor values. Ironically, the very thing we'd come up with to motivate them to work had instead become shackles on their productivity, creating a reason why they didn't have to work.

Well, I get it. There are many times in life when you want to complain like, *What? That's not my job, though…* It's not right when you're forced to foot the bill for something that someone else didn't do. It's not right. Seriously, I really mean it!

…So why do I have to be doing so much damn hard work?

As I was putting together the program and simulating the flow

of traffic during the event, yet another stack of documents was thumped down next to me. I flipped through it, wondering what it was this time, and found it was the application documents for the items to be borrowed for events.

"…"

With a rough scratch at my head, I stood up from my seat for a bit.

I needed a breather. I might just go outside for a little and go home for a sec and get in the bath and eat and then go to bed. As a breather. Breathers are important.

Figuring I'd buy myself a coffee or something, I was about to leave the meeting room when Yuigahama caught me.

"Oh, Hikki! Great timing."

I seemed to recall she'd been involved in constructing the entrance gates or something outside. *What, is she on a break or something?* I wondered, and I asked with just a movement of my head if she needed something from me.

"Man, we don't have enough people! Come help out, Hikki."

"Uhhh, I've got work, too… And wait, what happened to the crew?" I asked.

Yuigahama laughed weakly. "Ah-ha-ha… They said they have club…"

"Again?"

That had been a frequent pattern these past few days.

Using Sagami's promise to "not overburden the clubs" as their shield, many had been leaving before committee time was over or simply skipped entirely. And the attendee decrease had lessened the focus of those people who were present, and efficiency was dropping like a rock.

Everyone has their own things to deal with, and it's not like you can always be ready to work at full force. So when a hole opens up somewhere along the line, someone else will wind up filling it. However, as long as everyone was only considering their own shifts, those holes would not be filled. We'd prepared an ample buffer to avoid such a situation, but we were still losing our ability to cover it.

That was the reason all of us executives were out working ourselves. Yuigahama in particular went out of her way to help wherever she could, busying herself with the event coordination as well as doing hands-on work herself.

But if you sat down and thought about it, she wasn't really suited for construction… Partly because she's a girl, but especially because, if her taste in cooking is any indication, I kinda get the feeling she doesn't have much aptitude for making anything. I wouldn't want her to be causing trouble for others right now, and it'd be an issue if the labor lagged further behind. This was around the point when I was getting sick of doing nothing but desk work, and getting on my feet for a bit seemed like it might be nice, and also…also… Well, I guess I was fine with whatever.

"…Well, I can help a little while I'm on my break."

"Okay! Thanks." Yuigahama gleefully prodded me along.

Cracking my shoulders and neck, I obediently went where she directed.

We walked through the hallway and down the stairs, and I saw a bunch of people in this pillared courtyard area making some unidentifiable bar-like object that I guessed would be the entrance gate. I assumed the crew was handling this for us, but it turned out the one grinding away with a saw was one of the student council.

The crew weren't moving around much, and they were constantly glancing over at the clock.

"What the hell is going on here…?"

"Well, ah-ha-ha…" Yuigahama laughed to smooth over the awkwardness, but I frankly couldn't find the humor. It wasn't like we had that much extra time until the sports festival. And this was where we were?

I'd imagined this would happen, but actually witnessing it still just about broke me. If we were in this state, then did it even matter if I flaked out?

"…This is like…me at my part-time job."

"Hikki, I'm impressed you didn't get fired with that attitude…"

I wonder about that, too, but for some reason, I still don't get fired even when I totally half-ass it, you know? Though I actually wanted to get fired. Also, if you just feign ignorance, they often leave it at that. The store had to be aware of the risks in hiring high school kids. I'd even hazard they could find a replacement fairly easily.

We wouldn't find replacements for this committee easily, though. Of course, we could try talking and negotiating with all the clubs and soliciting more people, but we didn't have the time or personnel to communicate everything from square one. Working

things out together should be the fastest way.

But still, I surveyed the scene again with my characteristic rotten glare. I could scan this crew all I wanted, but none of these people were motivated to work. And as a completely unmotivated person myself, I know what to look for.

As I was wondering about just what to do here, beside me, Yuigahama scratched her cheek with a wry smile. “I thought about trying to talk to everyone here, but the time didn’t seem right…”

“No, that was the right choice.” If she’d made a big speech now, it would have only stirred up animosity instead, and then we’d be done for. We’d already gone past the stage of trying to motivate people.

It would be best to go with my usual style of not counting on others for everything. If someone’s not doing it, they’re never gonna do it, no matter what you tell them.

We’ve gotta make signs and entrance gates and lots of other stuff, huh? For now, I guess we’ll just finish up what’s been started.

I managed to find one familiar face among the student council members there and headed for where he was working. Looking over, I saw a bunch of guys taking a break behind him. Maybe they were taking turns working? *(I’m playing dumb here.)*

“I brought some help!” Yuigahama said, pointing to me, and the student council boy looked relieved.

…Yeah, you’ve done some good work on your own. Without a word, I extended my hand. He picked up on my intention and passed over the hammer. I nodded. He nodded back at me, then walked over to the shade and took a seat there.

The members of the student council were a valuable labor force. We couldn’t be pushing them too hard, now. *Go have a nice break.*

Dangling the hammer in my grip, I checked over the job, then squatted and got into position. “Then let’s do this.”

“Yeah!” Yuigahama replied, crouching on the other side to hold down the piece of lumber.

Uh, um, if you squat down right in front of me, I can almost see your panties… Put on your gym pants for this stuff! Agh! I don’t even know where to look!

I swung the hammer in an attempt to sweep away such intrusive thoughts. If I didn’t concentrate, I’d hit my fingers.

While we hammered away together, the guys who’d been

resting all this time unsurprisingly seemed to get uncomfortable. “Guess we’ll help out,” one of them said as they finally started to get up, among other worthless comments. And then, very graciously and kindly, they resumed working where we could clearly see them. They had to feel like they were being monitored. This had actually worked to deter them from slacking, more or less.

Occasionally checking that they were still working, I hammered in nails. Guess this is what you might call *hammering* a point in, huh? Heh, that one was pretty good…

We continued working for a while, and then suddenly, one of the guys from the crew called out. Of course, not to me. “Oh, hey, Yuigahama.”

“Yeah, what’s up?” Yuigahama reacted, turning around. That threw off the balance of the board I was hammering, and I nearly smashed my finger. *Whew, that was close; if I’d hit my finger, I might’ve screamed something like* Kugyu!

Hey, that's dangerous, okay? Hold it down like you're supposed to, all right? I thought, lifting my head to complain, but Yuigahama was looking off in another direction. It seemed the guy who'd come to talk to her was showing her something.

"Does this look good?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think it's fine… I don't know for sure, though."

You don't know…? She sure is careless…

The student council member scooted over, whispered a word of advice to her, and left again.

"Oh, it sounds like it's okay."

"Thanks. That helps. Oh, and so, like, some more things might come up that I don't know about, so if you could give me your number…"

"…You hear that?" Yuigahama said, looking over to the aforementioned student council guy. He popped out from the shade and pulled out his phone, and they immediately exchanged contact info.

"Th-thanks…" The guy from the crew thanked her with a stiff, difficult-to-read expression.

…Well, some guys are like that. They'll use events as an excuse to hit on girls. There's nothing to be done about this. *Ignore it, ignore it. Just don't pay attention to any of it. Right now, I'm nothing more than a craftsman pursuing the art of swiftly hammering in nails. I won't be concerned with anything else.* So if I wasn't concerned with it, then I wonder why I could hear their voices so clearly? How mysterious. This was one of the top three seven wonders of the world. Oh wow, that's twenty-one wonders in total!

"So anyway, what do you do on the weekend?"

Even knowing he wasn't saying it to me, I still glanced over at the guy and saw he'd already stopped working and was fully in chat mode. Come on, even on *Emiko Kaminuma's Chatter Cooking*, she keeps her hands moving a little more than that as she does it. Learn from Emiko.

But it was inevitable that the conversation would continue. Yuigahama won't ignore people when they start conversations with her.

"Huh? Just normal stuff. Oh, but lately, I've been busy working on the sports festival. Including today."

“If you’re working on this on the weekend, then how about we come help once we’re done with practice? If you give me your number, we can contact you.”

Yeah, yeah, someone who wanted to help out wouldn’t have been slacking off earlier, you know? Whoops, my palms suddenly got all sweaty. I’d expect nothing less of myself. This is the very guy who was forced to hold hands with a girl in the second year of elementary school on a field trip and whose hands got sweaty and grossed her out. With my hands sweating this much, I might let the hammer slip out of my grip and smack right into the back of the head of this jock. *Heh-heh-heh.*

When I was looking up to make sure my hammer would accidentally slip in the right direction, Yuigahama said, “Oh, that’d be great! But if we do a good job this week, we won’t have to do any more this weekend. And I really wanna go hang out on days off.”

Even after she turned the subject back to work, it seemed that boy was quite past giving a damn, and he kept chatting. He was coming off pretty insistent… “Hang out, huh? Where do you go to hang out?”

“Huh? Usually, Yumiko decides… Well, I guess I leave that stuff to her?”

“Oh, Miura… Miura, huh…?” The boy’s voice was a little quieter this time.

Yeah, this is, like, proof that I’m concentrating real hard. That has to be it. It’s like that thing when you’re studying while listening to music, and before you know it, you’re not hearing the music anymore. Empty the mind, empty the mind! Just concentrate on the wood. This isn’t the time for distraction. Look, it’s just, you know, because I love work so much…

…Ugh, let’s finish this thing up quick and get out of here.

Banging at the nails was starting to feel like part of some curse ritual. Smoothly hammering along, I reached into the box with the nails for the next one, but my hand swiped through air.

“…There’s no more nails.”

Six-inch nails, that is. Wait, no, normal nails are fine.

“Here,” someone said, and I looked up to see Yuigahama offering me some nails. They clinked together in her hand.

“…Uh-huh.” Making sure not to touch her palm, I carefully took a nail. You know, this is just like the time I discovered that when a

cute convenience store clerk firmly takes your hand to give you your change, you get a crush on her. Those who would be boys must avoid direct physical contact.

"Wait, you're already done?" I asked.

"Huh? Done what?" Yuigahama gave me a blank look.

Of course I couldn't explicitly say *talking to that boy*. "Well…if you're fine, then it's fine," I added to avoid the question and returned to the nails.

Yuigahama is popular with guys.

Tobe had said that before in Chiba Village, during summer vacation. Tobe hadn't said it personally to my face, but I did hear that.

I think it's entirely natural.

She's got a cute face and a nice figure. She's cheerful and sociable. For someone at the top of the pile, she doesn't act self-important, and she can flawlessly get along with anyone.

Most of all, she's nice.

And her one flaw—that she's an idiot—can come off as a good thing to some people.

At events like these, the boys and girls feel closer (even if they're not), so it's to be expected that guys she'd normally have no interaction with would come talk to her. For her, I think that's probably not limited to events, though.

But actually witnessing it, I was again reminded: She really is different.

…She's not normal. Just as you'd expect from the top caste. Whether it was deliberate or unconscious, it was a little weird she could avoid all that after he'd pushed so hard.

As I was pondering this, I noticed that the area around us had become real quiet.

"Huh? What happened to those guys from earlier?" Looking all around, I saw the only one still here was that student council guy who was resting. Aside from him, it was just me, and Yuigahama in front of me.

"Yeah, they said they had club stuff or something, and they left… Actually, that was probably thanks to Yumiko."

…Oh, I knew it. She consciously avoided it, huh?

It seemed she'd deliberately brought up Miura's name to avoid that boy. Despite what you'd expect from how Yuigahama looks and normally acts, she's tough. She's got strong skills in girl politics, or

maybe I'd call it class politics. Stats-wise, I feel like she'd have about 90 Politics or so. Also, I feel like Miura would have around 95 Leadership. How scary do you gotta be that you can use that to ward off boys? Oh, though I understand the feeling. Miura *is* scary.

Though she could've just given him her number, but I'm sure she has her reasons. Besides, thinking too deeply about that would send me way down an ugly rabbit hole, so better to just stop there.

Pulling myself together, I adjusted my grip on the hammer. "… Anyway, let's do this."

"Yeah!" Yuigahama raised her arm with that cheerful reply.

But I'm basically the one doing the work here.

The hammer clanged.

The noises of the task resounded particularly loud in the courtyard, mingling with the yells of the baseball, rugby, and soccer clubs on the distant field, and sharp whistling from the track club.

After hammering in one, two nails, I felt a focused gaze on me.

"…What?" I asked. Not a fan of being stared at.

Yuigahama flailed her hands in response. *Uhhh, please keep holding the wood, though…*

"Oh, it's nothing, nothing… But, like, Hikki, you're surprisingly good at this."

"Anyone can do this."

Boys just sort of wind up knowing how to use tools, through Mini 4WD and stuff. Of course you use screwdrivers for that, but you also need wire cutters, pin vise drills, and sandpaper and stuff.

And not just with Mini 4WD—boys always want to make things, once they get the tools. You get some random scraps of wood, and you'll make some weird whatever, and cardboard box architecture is a given. Whether you're good at it is another thing, but you'll at least learn to do simple construction. Especially boys who have nothing else to do.

Well, girls don't really do that stuff. Maybe in the future, when we have to come check on this kind of work, it'd be best for me to come. Though I hoped that wouldn't be necessary in the end…

As I continued swinging my hammer, lost in my thoughts, Yuigahama suddenly muttered, "Y'know…this kinda thing is sorta nice."

"What? How?" In terms of progress with the work, we were completely up against the wall. Also, it was weird for me to be working this late, and also weird for us to be doing this work… We

had other stuff we actually had to be doing…

I shot Yuigahama a dissenting *What are you talking about?* glare, and she suddenly smiled. Like she found it funny.

"Kinda feels like a high school memory in the making."

"…Are you dumb? This right here is total corporate slavery."

If staying behind to work is a high school memory, if being made to do other people's jobs is a high school memory, then adults with jobs must all be reliving their youth years every day. At the very least, my own dad is stupidly tired when he comes back from work and full of endless complaints against society and his workplace, so I very much doubt that is making the most of your youth.

"I mean, isn't your idea of high school memories more sparkly and ridiculous and incomprehensible and stupid or whatever?"

"What the heck are you imagining?! That's not what I mean!" she shot back like this was completely outrageous for me to say.

So that's not it? I thought for sure she did like that stuff, though.

She sighed for a long time. "Aaagh. Listen, during the cultural festival, I spent all my time with the class, so we never got to do anything together, right?"

Now that she mentions it, that's true. In fact, I think Yuigahama's efforts were a big part of how we'd managed to handle things well within the class. I dunno, she just gets picky when it comes to the nitty-gritty of the budget, you know…

But maybe that was just the sort of activity that, to her, had potential as a youthful high school memory.

"You got that whole 'youth' experience with the class, right?" I said. "And you played in a band with Yukinoshita, so be proud of that. That should be youthful enough for you, too."

"It's not just that…" Yuigahama puffed up her cheeks and looked away with a pout. Her face was flushed. The descending sun's rays poured down from above the special-use building, and before long, it had colored the whole courtyard crimson.

If I could assume that Yuigahama's definition of *youth* was to accomplish something together with Yukinoshita, then, well, I dunno, that's, like… Love is heavy.

I should offer her some advice here. "If you're so glued to her all the time, that's exhausting, too. And the moment you become aware that it's exhausting is the most exhausting part."

"Whoa… That's an awful thing to say…" Yuigahama was

aggressively disturbed.

Don't just jerk away your whole upper body. It'll mess up the contact patch between the boards. Act as freaked out as you want; just keep it in place. I fixed the shifted boards, then hammered nails into the remaining corners.

Hmm. That should be enough for now. Next, I guess I'll saw off all the spots that are sticking out. The people of Chiba have a deep connection with saws. That's because there's a mountain in Chiba called Saw Mountain—Mount Nokogiri. There's really no other connection there. In fact, I'd even say they have nothing to do with each other.

I stood up and went over to get a saw. Finding one handy, I returned to find Yuigahama still pouting.

"That's not what I was trying to say, though…," she complained.

"Well, whatever." I adjusted my grip on the saw and set my foot on the sign to stabilize it. I kept my gaze completely focused to prevent my hands from shaking. "As long as you're in this weird club, we'll wind up doing this sort of thing again. You can do stuff together anytime."

How much would the grinding of the saw drown out our voices? I continued swiftly drawing the blade back and forth at a diagonal.

"…Yeah, that's true."

But no matter how much noise I made, there wasn't much point. I could hear Yuigahama's voice clearly.

I was the one to say that we could do this stuff at any time, but I believed my own words the least of all.

It's best not to assume there will always be a next time. You can't afford to believe that. Relationships between people are more unstable than you think. Including ours.

I whittled down that piece of wood bit by bit, scattering dust and splinters until my hands felt no more resistance, and in the end came a dry clunk.

X X X

I worked until we reached a good stopping point, then decided to

leave the rest to Yuigahama and the student council members, returning to my own task.

When I entered the meeting room, Yukinoshita lifted her head and looked over at me. “My, I thought you’d disappeared somewhere… Have you already finished that simulation of the crowd flow I asked you for earlier?”

“If I had, I’d be handing it to you.” Doesn’t take much to figure that out. Since work is something you want to drop as soon as possible, I’d obviously be throwing it down the moment it’s done.

When I shot her a look, Yukinoshita coolly swept back her hair. “I wasn’t asking to confirm. It was pressure.”

“Is that right…?” Well, if someone asks you, *Is it done yet?* you’ll have no choice but to reply, *I’m doing it right now!* You can never say no in this workplace.

Guess I’ve got no choice. I’ll work. If someone’s putting pressure on me, then I’ve gotta do it. Yukinoshita is impressive as always, with her high-pressure reputation. I wonder if she also puts pressure on her heart to keep its growth in check. Well, I hope her whole chest region will resist and grow bountifully.

Grumbling to myself, I wearily sat down in the seat that had been prepared for me beside Yukinoshita and resumed the task I’d been interrupted in before.

I checked the papers piled on the desk, ready to go through them.

Ooone, twooo, threee… Four… But wait…

There’s even moooore work…

I shot a “Bancho Sarayashiki”–style resentful look at Yukinoshita. When she noticed it, she glanced toward Meguri.

…Ohhh, I see; it was Meguri. But looking at her, I could tell she was very busy, too. *Should we be forcing her to do this when she has to study for university entrance exams? And, like, the student council elections are soon… She probably can’t retire until we have a successor. Then we should reduce her burden at least a little.*

Scratching my head, I got myself back in gear and faced the paperwork once more.

Writing in the spots where the students would be sitting, the avenues they’d take from place to place, the standby locations for upcoming events, and the positions of the entrance gates, while comparing with my own memories of past events, I simulated the movements of crowds and made the appropriate adjustments in the

positioning of various things.

This is so boring…

"Take care of this, too." Yet another item was added to the mountain of paperwork: some pages in a clear folder.

Listen, my desk is not a drop box, so you can't just pile on everything…

Looking to the side, I saw Yukinoshita typing at her computer. *Mgh, so she's working, too, after all…* When someone else is working, you feel like you have to, too. I really don't think peer pressure is good.

Well, it'd be nice if this pressure would also work on the crew, but unfortunately right now, the unspoken rule was that minimal effort was fine. And that being the case, we were forced to do the job instead.

I got this, but even so, I had to whine about it just a little and let off some steam. While my hands remained busy, I also moved my mouth. "Nothing but work lately."

"Surprising, isn't it?" she replied calmly. Of course, her hands also never rested, and the sound of her clacking away on the keyboard was the same.

As Yukinoshita said, it was indeed surprising. I never thought I'd find myself doing this much work… "Right? My dad would faint if he heard I was working."

"I wasn't talking about you… But that is certainly surprising, too. And your father sounds like a character." I heard her sigh in exasperation.

But I had an answer that would explain everything. "'Cause he's my dad."

"That's strangely convincing… But more to the point, it was Sagami who surprised me."

Startled by the mention of her name, I turned to the side to see Yukinoshita looking at Sagami working at a seat on a diagonal from her.

"She's actually doing her job," said Yukinoshita.

"That's a mean way to put it…" *"Actually"…? You're the one who recommended her for the position, though…*

But even saying that, I was a little surprised, too. I'd thought for sure that Sagami would lose all motivation, but it was like she'd pulled herself together, made an about-face, and was taking the job seriously.

Well, this was clearly a do-or-die situation for her. If her reputation crashed here, she'd have no chance of rising up again. If she failed, the only path left for her would be to maintain her pride by tearing down those below her.

But the question is, Is diligent effort enough? And the answer to that is no.

It seemed Yukinoshita also understood this well, as she added, "Although, it's unfortunate that she's not particularly good at it, so it's not enough for me to be able to leave my work to her." Ouch.

"If you're comparing her to you, I think that's a given." If you made Yukinoshita your standard, you'd probably wind up treating most people as incompetent.

For just an instant, Yukinoshita shot me an accusatory glance. "It's not just me. There are others who are fairly capable."

"Well, I'm sure there are some, but…" I figured the only ones who would be on a level with her would be Haruno and Hayama.

"Besides…," Yukinoshita continued quietly. At some point, her hands had paused in their task. They were lightly balled over her keyboard, as if she couldn't find the strength to make fists. "…I wouldn't call myself particularly talented, either. Judging from how this schedule is collapsing." There was a *click* as she pushed a key. Maybe she was revising the schedule to adjust for our current progress.

But this wasn't her fault, as the one who had made up the shift schedule. In fact, without that, I doubt anyone would have done anything.

"It's not like this is your fault."

"You think…?"

"Yeah, I think. Society's at fault. Definitely."

"That goes well beyond just passing the buck…" Yukinoshita chuckled derisively before stretching her back and facing the computer once more. As if to make up for the time we'd just spent chatting, her hands flew across the keyboard.

She was feeling responsible, most likely, but this really wasn't her fault.

The reason behind the lagging of the work was bigger and more obvious than shifts or schedules. The problem here was motivation.

Though there was no boycotting going on in this committee, there was constant opposition and a tendency for things to grind to a halt. When it came to physical labor, the crew would use Sagami's

promise of “making sure not to overburden the clubs” as their shield to leave.

Of course no one would feel motivated in this environment.

But they still came to work according to the shift schedule, and when they used that shift schedule as an excuse, you also couldn’t be flexible with the personnel management. Ultimately, the executive team made up the difference.

In the end, as before, I got a chain of odd jobs on an overtime schedule.

There were also a lot of uncertain elements that we had yet to work out.

If things continued this way, the project would soon fall apart.

X X X

After a few days of nonstop work, just hearing the hustle and bustle in the morning got me depressed.

Though it was the beginning of a new day, everything already felt like it was over, weighing us down. Because the other classes all crowded around the school’s front entrance, that air flowing through there felt particularly hollow and superficial.

People who aren’t really on bad terms but who seem vaguely distant with one another. Friends of friends. Friends who had shared a class last year but drifted apart since. People in the same club. With all these individuals encountered at varying distances, everyone put on a different mask for the different people they spoke to, and those personas will be different from your true self.

Everyone uses various lies to different ends on a daily basis. However, loners are pretty amazing in this area. They’re all alone from beginning to end. To use folktales as an example, it’s like how the simple types who are always honest to everyone inevitably get rich.

By immersing myself in my stupid thoughts, I completely cut off the noise around me, shifting slightly to the right and left as I walked to avoid bumping into the flow of people. It’s just like a Dempsey Roll.

Arriving at my shoe cubby, quietly muttering “Makkunouchi, Makkunouchi,” I thrust my hand forward. I wasn’t punching or

anything; I was just grabbing my indoor shoes. These dumb fantasies are so much fun.

When I stuck my hand into the cubby to get my indoor shoes, I felt my hand hit something crumply.

What's this? I thought, and I looked.

…Oof.

Someone put garbage in my shoe cubby…

The wrappers of some snacks and balled-up scraps of paper had been stuffed into my shoes.

Huh? What the hell? Is this bullying?

I figured I might as well check and see if anything else had been put in it. While I was at it, I also peeked into the cubbies of the people above and below me, but mine was the only one with garbage in it.

…Well, here we are, I guess.

This made sense to me, and I felt my heart become strangely cold. The awareness of it also brought a heavy weariness from my shoulders to my back. It wasn't like anger or sadness—the perfect descriptor would be something like resignation.

Being ignored and snubbed was no different from always, so I wasn't bothered by it. I talk behind people's backs, too, so I can understand that. But I don't get it when people engage in this sort of childish behavior. What meaning is there in this? Who gains from it? What benefit does it yield?

I'd thought that because this school was university oriented, there would be fewer idiots, but there are exceptions to everything. This wasn't nearly as bad as it could be, being that bullying at our school has never reached the point of violent behavior. And I might call it fortunate that the garbage stuck in there didn't include any food. The world is overflowing with so many idiots, so I could consider myself lucky that the one I was dealing with was no worse than this.

Thanks to this, I'd learned a lesson.

When someone falls, they fall to the very bottom.

Everyone acknowledges that it's okay to attack someone who's already a target.

For just the slightest moment, I stopped moving.

I'd thought that I was prepared for anything at this school, no matter how bad it got, but I'd still gotten a little upset. I still had some ways to go. I was embarrassed at myself for losing my

presence of mind for even an instant over something so stupid.

Well, if this was all, then there were still ways to deal with it.

I quickly pulled myself together and grabbed the garbage that had been put in my shoe locker. And then I focused my sixth sense on the people around me… Good, my stealth ability is still intact. It seemed I could still use it in a crowded and chaotic environment.

Once I'd made sure that nobody was paying attention to me, I reexamined the position of my shoe cubby.

Since our student numbers were assigned based on phonetic order, the number right before mine was Hayama's, and right before that was Tobe. Before that was Totsuka. The shoe cubbies were also assigned based on our student numbers, so our four names were in the same order.

This is divine providence!

I put the garbage I'd grabbed into Tobe's shoe cubby, which was positioned relatively close to mine.

…*Forgive me, Tobe.* Just as I had become a sacred sacrifice to someone else's dark pleasure, this was a necessary sacrifice for myself.

Well, it was a decent enough self-defense ploy. I could use it anywhere or on anyone, but this time around, it was effective.

My hands were dirty now, so I shook them off with a clap and calmly left the area.

Then from behind, I heard some overly excited voices. It seemed Tobe had finished morning practice and was running in through the front entrance.

I glanced back to see that he was saying his hellos to his various friends as he stuck his hand into his shoe cubby.

"Heeey, bro! Wait, huh?" Tobe froze, apparently sensing something was off. And then, with some trepidation, he pulled out his indoor shoes. "Huh…? Ahhh! For real?! What?! Hey, hold up, huh?!"

That dramatic yell drew everyone's attention.

As the crowd watched Tobe from a slight distance, a few who looked like friends of his came up to him and burst into laughter.

"Whoa, Tobe, this is pretty hilarious."

"Pfft, that's bullying, isn't it?"

Tobe responded to each comment with melodrama. "Hold on, man! There's, like, garbage in my shoe locker! What the hell, am I getting bullied?! Hey, am I getting bullied?!"

Despite his volume, his brave front was somewhat transparent. Guilt pricked my heart. *Urk, sorry, Tobe.*

As I was silently apologizing, Hayama was weaving through the people around Tobe. Like Tobe, he had to be returning from morning practice. “Tobe, keep it down…” Hayama was low energy and seemed annoyed with Tobe’s wailing into every corner in the school.

But Tobe just got more excited, as if to make up for Hayama’s lack of enthusiasm. *He gets so worked up when he sees Hayama; does he have a crush on the guy…?*

“Hey, Hayatoooo! Listen, oh my god. Someone put some trash in my shoe cubby! Like from Pocky or Kari-Kari Ume. Oh, and there was Otoko-Ume in there, too!”

“…” Hayama’s expression suddenly hardened. Still silent, he reached into his own shoe cubby and froze, glaring into the darkness.

But only for a moment.

He pulled out his shoes and shoved his feet into them, turning around and smiling at Tobe. There was none of the coldness that had been there before. “You should keep your shoe cubby cleaner. Maybe someone just mistook it for a garbage bin. Take your indoor shoes home sometimes to wash.”

“Hey, Hayato! Brutal!”

“I’m joking. If this happens again, we’ll find some way to deal with it. Right now, let’s go leave our things in the clubroom.” Hayama flicked Tobe in the forehead, and as Tobe’s head snapped back a little, Hayama lightly patted his shoulder and prodded him on to their clubroom.

“Dude, this is nuts. The Ministry of Education was full of crap saying bullying doesn’t exist at this school. This is why I hate politicians!” As he walked off, Tobe continued to loudly complain.

Impressive reaction. I doubt there are many who’d take a hit like this in such an annoying way. What’s more, he was spreading the information around as if he had to get attention out of it right now.

I have nothing against Tobe. It’s not even about liking or hating him—I just don’t really care about the guy. Shoving that garbage into Tobe’s shoe cubby wasn’t about resentment; it was self-defense.

Tobe is an attention-getter, so his publicizing this info would prevent whoever had surreptitiously pulled this move from making

any further direct attacks. There was no need for the perpetrator to be watching this spectacle. They'd eventually hear it through the grapevine.

It was a gamble as to whether Tobe would make a scene about this, but I believed Tobe would. He may not look it, but he's a pretty bland character when you get down to his core. He might have been genuinely stunned, but knowing Tobe, he'd opt for making a scene to defend himself. He wouldn't take it as bullying that he should worry about; he would accept it as teasing or nice material for a joke, diverting the issue toward humorous banter.

There were two reasons I thought that to be the case.

The first is because Tobe's kind of a ditz. My hopeful hypothesis had been that he'd get the conversation going in a lighthearted direction.

The second was Tobe's own position. Since he was associated with the top caste, there would be a tendency to assume he wouldn't take hits like that, and most of all, he had supportive backing if he ever did. That was why he could deal with it as a joke. Or maybe he has a pride that kept him from letting people see him get down.

Whichever it was, this may have been the first time I'd ever been thankful to Tobe. His spreading this around would make it harder for the culprit to do anything. There was no need for me to bother looking for them. There was nothing to be gained. If there were no more attacks, then it's all good. And even if it did continue, then I'd sacrifice someone else when that time came.

Fwa-ha-ha-ha! Too bad for you! Perhaps until now such underhanded methods may have worked for you, but I'm three times more underhanded than you guys think! By the way, I'm also a sneak, too! …Phew.

But was I hated enough that someone would do something like this? That was a little surprising. Well, being that I don't involve myself much with others, this may have been the only way they could attack. *This shouldn't escalate any further, but…*

Pondering the future, I headed off to the classroom.

Going up the stairs, I turned the corner to walk toward 2-F when I realized it was particularly quiet. Though it was normally stupidly loud, right at that moment, the only noise was murmurs like ripples.

Scanning all the way down to the end of the hallway, I noticed

everyone was watching something while keeping their distance. They'd stare for a bit, only to look away again and whisper and giggle to each other.

I looked over to the center of the storm.

There was Minami Sagami.

And then there was Haruka and Yukko.

A crowd had formed a circle around the three of them. Some were standing on Haruka and Yukko's side, while others were standing in the center. There were students near Sagami, too. I caught sight of Yuigahama among them.

At a glance, I could immediately tell they were arguing about something.

I gave them a curious look, and Yuigahama noticed me and trotted up.

"What's going on here?" I asked, and she leaned in to bring her mouth close to my ear. *Hey, that's too close.*

"So Sagamin said hi to someone, and they ignored her or something, and now it's kind of a fight…" She breathed a tired sigh against my ear, making a shiver run down my neck, but this didn't seem like the time to point that out.

The aforementioned trio was glaring angrily at each other. Judging from where they were standing, it seemed Sagami had run into Haruka and Yukko when she'd been about to go into the classroom, and that was when they'd ignored her.

Because she was practically barring the door at the rear of the classroom, the students of Class F were going in and out of the door at the front of the room.

Another hassle… Should I stop this or break it up? Unable to decide, I looked over at Yuigahama. It seemed she was also considering what to do.

How we advised them now would affect the relationships among the committee. No advantage seemed to be had here, whether we joined Sagami's side or Haruka and Yukko's side.

So then I guess a good plan would be to leave this stalemate and wait for time to run out…

I was about to give up, but there was one person here who would overturn the situation all on her own.

"Hey, I'm trying to get through here." That was all Yumiko Miura said as she scattered the onlookers, striding briskly up to the three girls. Her loosely curled golden locks swaying, she surveyed

the group with displeasure.

Sagami, Haruka, and Yukko all hesitantly retreated and took the opportunity to disperse.

The queen sallying forth will easily scatter the rank and file.

She had silenced both parties without any mediation or smoothing of matters.

Whoa, Miura…

Thanks to her, that morning's incident came to a close.

But these hot coals wouldn't cool off so easily. The embers would keep burning oh so slowly, and the moment the wind turned, they would flare up and burn us.

6

But even so, **Meguri Shiromeguri** is watching.

Class started in first period, and I gently turned my neck around as if I was trying to get the stiffness out of my shoulders. I caught sight of Sagami out of the corner of my eye, stealing a glance for just an instant. She was slouched over, her downcast gaze not even twitching.

How had the skirmish in the hallway that morning affected Minami Sagami? I wanted to find out.

Thus far, the conflict had been confined to the Sports Festival Committee, but with the incident that morning, it had spread to her day-to-day business as well. It had encroached into her real life, so to speak. Until this point, she would have been able to pretend she'd forgotten it all once the event itself was over, but now a clear, lingering discomfort remained.

It seemed that fact was slowly sinking in. Her usual, vaguely irritating "poor me" act quieted down, and I could tell she was in low spirits just by glancing over.

It wasn't funny to me, but I didn't feel sorry for her, either.

I don't have many opinions about Minami Sagami in the first place. Though she has annoyed the hell out of me, it's never been more than that. This is partly because we never had much of a connection to begin with, but also because I doubt we'll have anything to do with each other moving forward.

However, if I were to consider the matter from a purely objective standpoint, then I could offer an extremely brief—a very simple—impression of her.

In short, she's a common snob.

And she might be the most human of anyone I know.

If you count purity and sincerity as characteristic of cute animals, then Sagami's slyness is a characteristic unique to people. She deceives, coaxes, pretends, brags, and exaggerates her own merit. Those are some very human acts.

But the way she builds a pack and deals with her community is similar to that of animals, so on the other hand, you could take her to be a highly developed animal. I suppose the closest comparison might be apes like chimpanzees and bonobos. They are bound by hierarchy and rank, but they'll occasionally make use of their intellect or shriek to intimidate others.

Being constantly bound by the intracommunity hierarchy and concerned with its workings is who Minami Sagami is.

There are also those who will build a pack in a different sort of way.

Like Yumiko Miura.

If I wanted to make an analogy to how she makes a pack, she's like a tiger.

You might say she forms her pack to maintain territory, to protect and raise her children. This behavior tends to bring about a sort of maternal impression, but of course, to any other creatures, her claws and fangs are purely a source of fear. I mean, she really is scary…

Therefore, even if both girls have built packs, these packs have completely different nuances.

I wouldn't say that one of them is right and the other is wrong.

Both of them are right, of course. In society, the number of people you have is what makes you right, and what is right continuously changes depending on where you stand. If I must say, then perhaps the only point where they agree is that being alone is bad.

If that analysis seems harsh, well, so was Class 2-F.

Should I describe it as the savanna? When such a (metaphorically) wild world suddenly manifests in a society as developed as ours, the herbivore males have no choice but to shut up. Man, it's just brutal. All this unbridled aggression makes you wonder if this is *National Geographic*. You feel such a threat to your life, it's like, a safari park would be a little quieter. I could almost smell the blood in the air.

After the incident that morning, the class was filled with a strange tension.

The cause of that was Miura and Sagami. It was nothing new to find them both grumpy, but their power dynamic had now been made clear.

Even during class, when you'd normally hear a bit of murmuring, it was particularly silent. The only sound was the occasional tapping of Miura's nails on her desk. The stress would give you a stomachache; you didn't even want to clear your throat. And it just kept going.

Everyone avoided looking at Miura—and at Sagami, the one she was clearly miffed at. I'm sure it was partly because they wanted to avoid conflict, but if anything, I think they were trying to be nice by leaving them alone. Miura's group of friends in particular, including Hayama, Yuigahama, and Ebina, seemed to understand how to approach her at times like this, and they didn't really try to talk to her about it.

I mean, if you're mad and someone asks you why, it'll make you even angrier—even if you recognize the kindness or concern behind it.

As the fine saying goes, "A wise man does not court danger," and the more intelligent sorts will not approach other people thoughtlessly. Making contact with others is essentially sowing the seeds of trouble. Therefore, loners are wise, and I'm a wise guy.

But anyway, of course once break hit, enough time had passed since morning, and the regular bustle had returned to the classroom. Or maybe they were just telling themselves that things were normal again by deliberately spending the time as usual and reminding themselves that no, really, nothing at changed.

These little deceptions are valuable social lubrication. For others; since I don't ever need them, I find them annoying and kind of disconcerting.

This depends on how you establish the definition of *close*, but if you're actually close with someone, you wouldn't have to be so careful around them, would you? It's because they're someone you're *not* close with that you act so careful. You show your care by not speaking to them or getting close to them. Loners are more than half kindness—we're 100 percent kindness.

Just as the sun always rises, the usual energy returned to the class with time. Miura was already back to normal, and though she still seemed a bit distracted, she was chatting with Ebina and Yuigahama about this and that.

Once I saw what she was doing, I took in the classroom as a whole.

Sagami, on the other hand, had quietly left the room. Even once break began, she wasn't spending it with her "friends" that day, her coconspirators in all the backbiting, complaints, gossip, and whining.

Sagami was extremely vain, so the events of that morning—being ignored by Haruka and Yukko, tons of people having seen their fight—seemed to hit her hard.

Occasionally, people will seek out isolation of their own accord. Though they normally abhor and ridicule the loner state, they'll say they want to be alone only when it's convenient to them. Isn't that a little selfish…?

But if she really did want to be alone, there was a proper way to go about it. Rule number one, she shouldn't try to gain someone's sympathy or attract their concern, which would debase her own value. It'd be like personally advertising that she was a weakling who couldn't define the meaning of her own life without the approval of others.

Sagami's group of friends had noticed how quiet she was and tried to talk to her casually.

But Sagami responded with a weak smile. "I just need a bit…" With that one remark, she quietly left her seat.

This behavior was clearly different from the past.

Distancing people, deliberately putting herself apart—this was different from before, back when she hadn't even known where to put herself without someone else's approval or consideration.

I had my doubts about this apparent transformation, and I followed her with my eyes.

I'll say it again: People don't change so easily. This is my pet theory.

If you could change yourself based on one single event, then it was never you to begin with.

Someone with an ego, with a conscious awareness of the self, will refuse change in some way. At our core, humans will always try to maintain a sense of identity.

If change still seems to have occurred, then there is just one cause: They fell, got hurt, and got torn to shreds, and finally learned that form of pain. The next time, they'll try to avoid pain instinctively. That behavior makes it look as if you've grown—that's

all.

But once it's become a habit, it will, at some point, become something that defines you.

People are judged purely by their actions. An objective evaluation is essentially an assessment of your behavior. Therefore, even if your behavior started as instinctual crisis evasion, it can be a precursor to an outward, objective change—even if it isn't an intrinsic change.

I think it was Mother Teresa who said this: Thoughts become words, and words become actions. Those actions become habits, and habits become personality. And then personality will eventually become your fate, or something like that.

Ah, wise words from the mother. Nice stuff. She's great. Mother Farm is pretty amazing, too. Their soft-serve ice cream is absolutely delicious.

People are judged based on what comes to the surface: words, actions, and habits. Others will judge these things to be their individual personality, their character.

Could Sagami's change in behavior really be a precursor to something?

X X X

After school, the meeting room was buzzing even louder than before.

The biggest reason for that may have been that Miss Hiratsuka, our supervisor, had other business and was absent today. Even so, no one on the executive side was opening their mouths, while the crew were just aimlessly chatting on and on.

If it had been like this before the start of the meeting, this wouldn't have been at all strange. It's normal to have a bit of small talk when people get together.

Unfortunately, right now we were right in the middle of a meeting that was deteriorating.

Of course, no matter how apathetic these kids were, this *was* a group of high schoolers, so they were still sitting quietly in their seats. But the low murmurs filling the room as they whispered to each other were as unceasing as the sea.

Haruka and Yukko were at its center. They were both total NPCs, as usual, and I couldn't really tell one from the other. And there were a bunch of other kids sitting in a huddle with them, which just made it worse. It was peak NPC energy over there.

While the executives sat at the front of the room in an open square, the crew was loud but also together in an unshakable group. The way our two sides were set up, it was like they were different tribes trying to hold each other in check.

"Um…if each team could give reports on their current progress…" Sagami hesitantly tried to cut through the chatter.

But no one replied.

"…First, the building projects, I guess. How is the entrance gate going?" Meguri asked, unable to stand by and do nothing.

Well, if we'd been dealing with people who were motivated, then the way Sagami had given instructions would've been fine. People who are driven will do what needs to be done themselves. But where we were now, with motivation at rock bottom, you had to narrow down your point, give precise instructions, and indicate specific people, or nobody would react.

I assumed Meguri was asking the crew, but Yuigahama was the one to stand up. "Oh yeah. We're just about done building the admissions gate, so now it just needs paint and decorations…so yeah."

"Oh, okay. Thanks," Meguri responded with a bright smile, but her eyes turned a little grim. No surprise there. Most of the building-related stuff had been assigned to the crew, and we'd also decided who was in charge of what. The ones raising their hands to report now should have been those people.

But now that us executives were involved, they'd decided that the authority had been delegated to us.

Well, I could understand that feeling. It was basically like we were taking back work from them before it was done.

This was a sort of negative spiral: Right now, it wasn't only motivation being lost—a sense of responsibility was disappearing at the same time. The unspoken rule was becoming *I don't need to do it myself, so I'll just leave it to someone else*.

The attitude shift of the crew was becoming clear: *We're being forced to do this* and *We're doing them a favor*. We were the ones requesting their help, after all. And the way this had worked out, the story was that they were going to the trouble of finding the time

for us, despite being busy with their club activities.

It was clear which party had the upper hand. If they were being paid with some reward, then things would have been somewhat different, but there was no guarantee they'd get anything. Since we weren't offering any compensation, it would be difficult to motivate them.

Though I could clearly see where we were stuck, the meeting continued.

"Next are the two major events… How are those going?" Meguri inquired, looking over at Yukinoshita. The executive side was essentially managing these things. But still, since all the other miscellaneous work had increased, we couldn't quite do everything.

"We've reviewed the traffic flow for the boys' event. As for the pending issue of the captains, we're about to select one for the red team and check with Hayama," Yukinoshita replied without hesitation.

Well, the pole pull-down wouldn't need much prep. The rules were simple; we just had to pick out the captains and then it was done.

The problem was the other one—the Chibattle.

"As for the girls' event…," Yukinoshita began, and a particularly loud swell of murmurs rose from the crowd. Looking to the epicenter, I saw some girls with their heads together like they were whispering about a secret.

And then one of them timidly raised her hand. Yukinoshita acknowledged her with a slight nod. "…If you have something to say, go ahead."

Now that I was really looking, I saw it was Haruka.

"Um… Well, it's about this…chicken fight? You know…it's a little…," Haruka said slowly, looking not at Yukinoshita but at her friends, as if she was verifying her answers.

Patiently, we waited for her to continue.

Then Yuigahama sighed in her chair off to the side. *What a coincidence—me too.* No matter how I thought about it, whatever Haruka had for us was gonna be trouble.

She was being vague because it was something that was hard to say, and things that are hard to say are never good. People are always like this when they're talking to me, so I understand. *What the heck, I'm ridiculously psychic; this is wild. Maybe my dad is gonna make me pose nude for a painting.*

What was coming next? I could guess the gist of it, but Yukinoshita chose to prompt her to continue. “A little…what?”

Yukinoshita’s gaze was always sharp, but when she enunciated so clearly, it cut like blades of ice. Haruka flinched, but then she seemed to remember the great number of allies at her back, and she stumbled her way through the rest. “Um, we were thinking, maybe a chicken fight is a little dangerous… You know, some clubs have tournaments coming up, so we don’t really want to do anything where someone could get hurt…” After the end of her argument, she gulped.

There came the slightest pause—who was it for, I wonder? In the dead silence, we all hesitated.

The one to break the ice was, surprisingly, Sagami. Her chair scraped, and she stood. “Wh-why are you bringing this up now…?!” Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly; she had nothing else to say. When Haruka and Yukko looked at one another, her shoulders trembled.

“I’ve been thinking this for a while, but…”

“…We have our clubs, too.”

Neither Haruka nor Yukko averted their eyes. They had a fair point. In their temporary reconciliation with Sagami, the implicit agreement had been that clubs would take priority. That had also been expressed in what they’d said themselves about “cooperating as much as possible.” And since all of us executives, including Sagami, had turned a blind eye to that, we’d justified their views. Fundamentally, we should have argued in that moment, even if it seemed like we were splitting hairs. Making that one concession meant it would be used as a basis to press us for even more.

What she had to do now was shoot them down. That wouldn’t be the wrong response. They were trying to make a demand without going through the proper procedure; it was a bad idea to accept this.

The executives gave Meguri silent eye signals, seeking confirmation on how to deal with this, and Meguri picked up on them but shook her head with a small smile. Then she looked over to Sagami.

Meguri intended to leave this to her.

And as for Sagami herself, she was biting her lip.

“But we’ve already decided…” Sagami barely managed a retort, so quiet it was hard to hear. Haruka and Yukko glanced at her and

then back at the crowd, then made eye contact before facing Sagami again.

“But, like, if it was a bad decision, then I think we should fix it now.”

“Plus, we’ve had some time to think about it now, you know?”

The pair of them threw down their counterarguments as if they’d prepared them from the beginning.

Oh, they probably had.

That was exactly why they were sitting in that arrangement. It was reasonable to assume they’d seated themselves together to fortify their surroundings with those of similar opinions. The fastest way to put on pressure is to have a numerical advantage in the background.

From even before the meeting, and now during the meeting, they’ve been giving little complaints on the level of small talk, secretly saying mean things. That makes it easy to nurture antagonism, and it would bring out any number of complaints about Sagami and the executives. Underlings always have complaints, no matter where they are.

Bad-mouthing is exponential. It balloons like a double-or-nothing game in a sort of synergistic effect. Even if each individual complaint is small, when they all come together, they’re taken seriously. Sooner or later, it will even delude people into thinking they’re messengers of justice here to right the wrongs, warriors of a revolution.

The perception that there are others who think similarly will justify your own underhanded behavior. If everyone thinks the same, then you can blindly accept that your own way of thinking is right.

That was the case right here, right now.

By clearly rejecting our plan, they had caused a stir that would shake up everyone with latent dissatisfaction. Once that dissatisfaction was public knowledge, those people would align with Haruka and Yukko.

To prevent that, the executives had to execute firm leadership and mercilessly beat down that faction’s opinions immediately. Just as in the world of beasts, they had to make a clear show of who was stronger.

If this were Yukinoshita, she probably would have done that. Even if their line of argument was only slightly irrational, she

would have immediately struck it down. Yuigahama would smile and smooth things over, saying something like *Wellll…* as she searched for an easygoing way to negotiate. Either would have figured out a way out of this situation.

But before we could make a move, Sagami quietly spoke. “But it’s kind of late for that now…,” she muttered weakly. She looked anxious and pale. She swayed and thumped into her chair like she was collapsing into it.

The tide of battle had been decided.

Now that Sagami, the leader of the executive side, had given in, the murmurs spread like ripples on the surface of water.

“A chicken fight really would be dangerous,” someone muttered —not Haruka or Yukko. Someone else from the crew must have said it.

Another voice followed. “And our tournament is coming up…”

“Whose fault will it be if someone gets hurt?”

Voices rose here and there, then blazed up like wildfire. Everyone said whatever they wanted, and then more people joined in until it was beyond control. The meeting room became a crucible of complaints and grievances until a loud clap rang out.

“Okay, attention!”

I looked over to see that Meguri was standing. “We understand all your doubts. We’ll be sure to think up a plan to deal with them,” she declared, and she quickly ended the discussion.

As expected of someone with her experience, she was quick to handle the situation. It would be best to end the meeting now and beat out the sparks before they spread. Cutting it off a little earlier would have been better, but Meguri had the tendency to keep her silence to test Sagami. But, well, since we were doing something similar, I couldn’t complain.

“For now, let’s get the other tasks going,” Meguri said to keep this conversation from dragging on any further.

But the people in the crew shared looks and whispered to each other. They weren’t going to let the discussion end here, were they?

Many of them were eyeing her with doubt.

Though it was quite clear from the beginning that Haruka and Yukko’s protests were just quibbles from a couple of particularly brazen girls, I couldn’t say for certain that their concerns were unmerited. It was true that we, as the executives, should have been considering safety measures. I could understand that they’d get a bit

sensitive with the clubs' tournaments so close.

But if you're gonna make that argument, then you shouldn't be in regular gym classes, either…

You can bump into things while you're walking, and running will lead to falls. People will always get hurt. Just by being alive, you'll be hurt and hurt others—that's how it goes.

But still, there was no point in my proclaiming such ideals or principles now. We had to present something that could make them back down right that moment, or they weren't going to let us drop it.

The crew were putting the pressure on with their looks—scornful and unhappy. They'd just been taking orders all this time; the way they saw it, the incompetent executives couldn't give clear guidelines to address this important problem. Griping about trivial things but then not showing leadership when it counts most is what a useless boss would do.

But if they didn't take us seriously enough, they might run into trouble.

We had a natural-born competitive type here who would respond if someone threw down the gauntlet so hard. What's more, she was ridiculously capable.

Until then, Yukino Yukinoshita had remained silent with crossed arms, but then she unfolded them and quietly raised her hand.

"Go ahead, Yukinoshita," Meguri said.

Yukinoshita silently rose to her feet, walked to the whiteboard, and picked up a marker. "To deal with this, given the current situation, there are a number of plans that will work."

Realizing something was beginning, the whole meeting room focused its attention on her as Yukinoshita started writing in smooth strokes across the board. "A first aid team will be on hand, for one, and we'll be cooperating with the local fire department. There will be strict adherence to the rules, more severe punishments for infractions, and tighter monitoring. Of course, this will require some personnel…" As she spoke, she continued to write. Maybe it was her calmness that left everyone with their mouths hanging open.

And then after writing a little more, she spun around to face us. "We'll establish the first aid team ourselves after a consultation with the school nurse, and I believe the school can contact the local fire

department to formally propose the plan." She shot a look over at Meguri, who nodded back at her.

"I don't think that'll be a problem. The student council will make a request to the school."

After swiftly acquiring her assent, Yukinoshita moved on without giving the others time to slip in any questions. "Students will be made aware of the rules in writing beforehand, and we'll also have the teachers help with supervision. This should curtail any dangerous behavior…"

This well-reasoned explanation was so like Yukinoshita.

The crew all reflected carefully on every item mentioned. I could see some of them consulting with each other in murmurs and hushed voices.

"What do we do?"

"Well, if that's the plan…"

"But you know…"

"Right?"

This wasn't really an exchange of opinions—more like a confirmation of feelings. They were reading the implications while also turning the atmosphere in their favor.

This high-context conversation went on, and eventually, it converged on our firebrands, Haruka and Yukko.

The two of them made a firm eye signal, and this time, Yukko timidly raised her hand. "But you can't be certain about that…" She seemed frightened, struggling to look up from the floor. She occasionally glanced over at Yukinoshita, as if she was trying to see how she was doing.

Yukinoshita met her gaze, never breaking eye contact, cold and clear. Yukko's voice gradually withered away. But she didn't retract any of it; she just ended with a quiet "Ahhh."

It seemed this was no longer a matter simple enough to be settled with logic. Even when you try undoing tangled thread, once it's got kinks in it, it'll just curl into knots again.

Plus, the executives were only pushing themselves to find a way to compromise with what the crew wanted, and that was all this was. Just one cog slipping out of place would make it all easily fall apart.

The silence continued for a long time. No—it was probably only a few seconds. But the air was so still, it sure felt like ages.

Though I doubt she had ever really been looking at the clock,

Haruka slowly said, “We’re about out of time…”

That remark prompted the others to look at the clock, too.

“A-anyway, since we have a plan to deal with this, for today…” Yuigahama reached up and lightly tugged on Yukinoshita’s sleeve.

“…Yes. Let’s work this out and organize a foolproof plan.”

“Then let’s call it a day. Great work, everyone! Oh, those who have tasks, do stay behind,” Meguri said, after Yukinoshita was done speaking. The gentleness of her tone undid the unease all at once, and after that, the room felt less suffocating.

There was a sluggish, stagnating air among those who stayed behind to work, but Haruka and Yukko immediately left. A few more followed. Since we’d promised to keep from overburdening the clubs, we couldn’t criticize them for it.

Those remaining here watched them go. The executives breathed short sighs.

But these were not at all sighs of relief. In fact, I’d call them sighs of resignation.

The problem was more deeply rooted than I had thought.

After time ran out on the meeting and then our time for tasks was over, we were thoroughly reminded that we hadn’t resolved a single thing.

In the end, the executives would be stuck working at full force that day, too. With the time and people we had left, and the new safety measures sprouting up on top of that, it really didn’t feel like we’d make it.

Since so many of us were gone, the cool fall wind breezed right through from the open window.

An “open office” clearly means one with few people, I thought as I considered the exploitative labor environment I was stuck in.

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In addition to building items like the entrance gate and panels, I also got together material like poles and ropes and stuff and entered completed tasks into a checklist. It was dull, but when you can see the end of it, that’s a saving grace of its own. All the more so in a situation like this one, where we didn’t have enough people.

The real problem is handling work you see no end to.

At the final stage of the checklist, an additional handwritten note said, *Regarding the safety management of the Chibattle*. I could feel my forehead wrinkling as I looked at that phrase.

And I wasn't the only one—all the executives in the meeting room at that moment felt the same.

"Right, so then what do we do about this…?" Meguri said with a *hmm*.

Yuigahama seemed to be in the same headspace; she folded her arms, tilted her head, and *hmm*'d as well, then gave up on thinking and sighed. "But I felt like Yukinon covered all the bases, there…"

"Yep. Frankly, if that doesn't persuade them, I'll wanna throw in the towel." I agreed with Yuigahama.

I was actually impressed with Yukinoshita, like *Wow*, for coming up with such a logical plan on the spot like that. But if we still couldn't get agreement from the crew after all that, then this was no longer just an issue of right and wrong.

This had begun with emotions—in antipathy toward Sagami and the executives.

Putting it like this, it really seems like a childish rationale, but that's the fundamental nature of people. Emotions are difficult to control, and they're incorrigible. Occasionally, they clash, and that brings about tragedy.

Sagami's hands suddenly stopped in her task, and she muttered, "Maybe I should just quit…"

That remark was a bit surprising. It was much more sincere than before. I think that was because the words sounded like they were directed at herself, rather than at anyone else. It didn't seem like she was trying to get anyone to acknowledge her.

None of us could reply.

In the silent meeting room, there was the rustling of cloth as Yuigahama quietly folded her arms the other way. "…Maybe. But still, I think this will work out."

I think Yukinoshita had said something similar before, herself, but more as a test. Yuigahama's tone was soft and gave me the impression she was trying to show concern for Sagami.

Sagami also seemed to pick up on that, and a wry, resigned smile came to her face. She was already aware of her own incompetence. "…Yeah."

"It's all messed up now," Yuigahama continued, "but it's not like you won't get a second chance. They might understand one

day…”

“Yeah…” Sagami nodded weakly in response, then hung her head again. I’m sure she didn’t believe a single word of Yuigahama’s conciliatory remark.

Sagami had already given up. She’d given up continuing on as the chair, and on ever reaching an understanding with Haruka and Yukko.

If that was what she herself wanted, then there was nothing to be done.

Sagami didn’t have what it took to be a leader in the first place. We’d learned that lesson well during the cultural festival incident.

The request we’d accepted this time was to make the sports festival succeed and to normalize the atmosphere of Class 2-F by doing something about Sagami.

If Sagami was so stricken, then most likely, she’d settle down for a while. Of course, once some time had passed, she might go bag on someone to justify her past actions. Frankly, considering her personality, it seemed likely.

But still, we could keep her quiet for the moment.

Then once Sagami had quit, if we could cover everything and guide the sports festival to success, then we would complete the request, in form. I wouldn’t call that the best outcome, but it would be reasonable. I figure that compromise would be the most we could do here.

As I was making these calculations, a chair scraped against the floor.

Looking over, I saw Yukinoshita had corrected the position of her seat. She’d had her eyes closed and arms folded earlier, but now she was sitting up straight and fixing her eyes ahead—on Sagami. “…But are you okay with that?”

“…Huh?” Sagami raised her head, confused. She didn’t understand what Yukinoshita wanted to accomplish by saying that.

But Yukinoshita continued, unperturbed. “You may not get a *next time* or a *someday*.” Yukinoshita’s words were cold, like sharp thorns, but her voice itself was kind, which was why Sagami could say nothing.

“…”

If Yukinoshita’s tone had been more of a challenge, Sagami may still have been able to come up with a reply.

But when you’re having a tough time or otherwise in pain,

kindness works. It shoves your own pathetic self in your face so plainly; it proves you're the sort of tiny creature that will be pitied; it makes you realize you're so powerless that someone else is helping you out with their kindness.

It feels better, if only a little, when someone treats you badly, because then you can say they didn't understand you.

Sagami bit her lip. She didn't instantly reply that she was quitting, which meant she was still holding on. But if she also couldn't say she was staying, that was because she had made an accurate assessment of her situation.

The reality was that now that it had come to this, whether Sagami was the chair didn't really matter. We would lose the manpower of only one person, Sagami as an individual. This was too messed up to expect her leadership to guide us. Frankly speaking, Sagami was unnecessary in her current position.

However, as for whether her quitting would solve it, the answer was no. We had already gone past that stage.

Sagami quitting now wouldn't resolve the problem.

Maybe she'd see slight improvement emotionally. If Haruka and Yukko's complaint were more simply that they didn't like Sagami, that would have worked out. But since the other party had introduced this strange logic, it had become more difficult to bring the situation under control.

Safety management and club activities.

The question was, Why were they making a fuss now? This bizarre logic was probably born from their attempts to coherently explain their emotional reasoning—their personal, subjective hate.

There's nothing more hopeless than logic that has originated from emotion. Like with this incident, they'd first reached the conclusion that they didn't like Sagami and the executives, and then they'd constructed logic to guide them to this point. Even if we destroyed their argument and told them their logic was wrong, we'd have to detangle their emotions from it all, or we'd never get them to listen.

And what's more, now that they were armed with this weird logic, they could no longer back down. Once we're at this stage, all that awaits is a never-ending mudslinging contest.

"I…" Sagami's head dropped, and her throat was tight as she spoke. But her voice faded, and the rest didn't come out.

Everyone went silent, waiting for the conclusion she would

offer.

Yukinoshita closed her eyes again and quietly listened, while Yuigahama watched Sagami gravely. I rested my chin on one palm and listened as I mulled over trivial issues like *My nails are too long…*

It was just one person. Only one person did something unexpected.

Meguri cleared her throat in a somewhat deliberate-sounding way, then slowly began to speak. “I think you’re doing a good job, Sagami.”

“Huh?” Sagami raised her head in surprise.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama reacted with similar shock. They maybe should have been more discreet, but I don’t blame them. After seeing everything Sagami had done so far, it was unusual to judge that she’d done well.

At their candid reactions, Meguri frantically waved her hands as she hurried to add, “Ah, um, well, you know… U-uh, it’s true that you don’t quite have the skills… But I’m not supercompetent myself, either, so I get it. You’re doing your best.”

That wasn’t so surprising. I did get the feeling that Meguri’s practical business skills were mediocre at best, and I didn’t really get the impression that she was a strong leader outside of the student council.

She seemed a little self-conscious about that herself, quietly looking away to scratch her cheek in embarrassment. “Oh…there were a lot of really competent people in the years before me. You know”—her voice faded to a murmur—”…like Haru.”

Yukinoshita’s eyes narrowed at the name.

It’s true—Haruno Yukinoshita is on a whole different level as a character. Not only does she excel in practical skills, there’s something sort of scary about her power of command, how she can see straight through someone to seize control of their heart. Nobody can compare.

“People like to tell me I’m a scatterbrain and stuff, and they’re right… Ah-ha-ha, without everyone on the student council, I’d be a total disaster,” Meguri said, and all the student council got a little teary-eyed. Some of them were even acting all touched and going like, *Aw, come on*. Just how much did these guys adore her?

But, as that fact indicated, Meguri was saying she was only managing this seat of leadership with the personal charm she just

happened to have. Turn that around, and she was saying Sagami lacked that charm, but let's leave that aside for now.

"I think you're doing well, Sagami. You've worked hard to get this far, so why not keep at it just a little longer?" Meguri was smiling shyly. It was very attractive on someone with such a cute personality.

Though nobody had actively tried to stop Sagami, only Meguri sincerely thought well of her development, and that was why Meguri was trying to entrust the future to her. This was why the student council adored Meguri and why she was still the president.

The lines of Sagami's face softened. This was probably the first time during the course of the cultural and sports festivals that someone had shown her appreciation.

"How about it?" Meguri said with a smile, punctuating her question, and Sagami gave her a little nod.

Yuigahama and the student council breathed out little sighs as they watched. Yukinoshita's expression remained in place, but there was a hint of a smile in her eyes.

But this scene didn't look so beautiful to me.

This decision would drive Sagami into an even more painful and difficult position than she already was. She would be marked with wounds she'd avoided receiving before.

Kindness is poison. Meguri's comfort would force Sagami into an even worse predicament. Running away would have been the right decision to avoid further damage. This was walking out into the line of fire. Even if this went well, the grudges of the past were not going to disappear.

We already knew. A fistfight is not going to bloom into friendship. You can paint over animosity with positive feelings, but it'll never disappear. When you least expect it, the guilt will peel off to reveal the hate and malice underneath.

So there wasn't much point in Sagami's determination or efforts.

However, if Sagami was prepared for that and still said she wanted to take the lead…

…then that meant something. She was rebelling against the people who failed to understand her; she was lashing out against the majority.

I will not reject those who walk the honorable path of solitude, so I wasn't going to invalidate her decision, even if there was a

horror to the kindness that had led to it.

"All right, then what are we gonna do?" This was why I decided to set aside my own analysis and move the conversation onward. I had no right to obstruct Sagami's decision. I wasn't even obligated to warn her. I doubt she wanted to hear anything I had to say anyway. She had already made up her mind. The chair would not be replaced, which meant we had to decide where we were going from there and crystallize that into concrete measures.

Once that question had been raised, Yukinoshita immediately responded, "I see no reason for us to capitulate, so we have no choice but to make them back down."

Calm and collected as ever. This was a policy that would respect the conclusion Sagami had reached. If confronting them and trying to compromise was not going to work out, then there was nothing for it now but to beat them down. I also agreed with that plan.

"But…" Sagami frowned hesitantly. It seemed what had just happened was apparently causing her some concern.

Meguri continued for her. "How will we get them to back down?"

This was the problem. Neither I nor Yukinoshita had a solid plan for that yet.

After some moments of silent consideration, Yuigahama timidly raised her hand, so I nodded for her to go ahead. "Like…t-try to convince them?" she asked nervously.

I mean, yeah. But given the current situation, I doubted it would be an effective method.

"We've done plenty of that already…," I said.

All this time, we'd been nagging them to come work, we'd imposed a shift schedule, and we'd even rearranged the shifts for the crew, too.

After those concessions and compromises, here we were. Meguri, who had seen this firsthand, strongly agreed. "You're right. We have to think about their motivation… If we start nagging and that drains their enthusiasm, it'll make everything worse," she said.

That seemed to convince Yuigahama, too, and she *hmm*'d with a particularly difficult expression, folding her arms. But I wasn't really convinced.

The word *motivation* stuck with me awfully. Who here had ever been motivated?

I had no intention of supporting Sagami or of becoming an ally to Haruka and Yukko—since neither side was right. We had to restart from the ground up. "…So do we make the crew all quit instead? And then gather new people," I suggested, half joking. Meaning I was also half-serious.

Once things get messed up, you're screwed. If we weren't going to bail, then they would bail. It was extremely simple logic. Besides, rather than just half dealing with the problem and leaving a breeding ground for future trouble, it wouldn't be out of the question to go back to square one instead.

"Hmm… We might not make it in time, then." Meguri scrunched up her forehead, creating a valley between her eyes. In terms of the days remaining, we did have some leeway, but we couldn't operate on weekends. Plus, as Meguri said, we didn't really have the time to start gathering up a whole new crowd. I also understood that my idea was unrealistic. But with our current personnel, we wouldn't make it in time anyway.

Then suddenly, Yukinoshita said, "…I'm sure we will need to invest in some new help, but I don't think we can replace absolutely everyone. Realistically, we should narrow it down to a few and limit them purely to assisting roles."

"Getting assistance for us instead, huh?" I said.

Yukinoshita nodded and put her hand to her chin, gathering her thoughts. "That's right. We fell behind in our own work because we were dealing with crew matters, so we should be trying to get ourselves back on track."

So even if we were going to get new help from somewhere, we still had the same problem of how to manage our existing forces.

Listening to us, Yuigahama stuck up a finger. "Whatever we do, this means we have to come up with a plan to work with the people we have now, right?"

"But I don't think they'll cooperate with us anymore…," Sagami said apologetically.

"They essentially have a hold on our greatest weakness—we're short on manpower." Yukinoshita breathed a short sigh. She pressed her temple with her fingertips, looking rather weak herself.

…Weakness, huh?

She was right. Because we couldn't get ourselves fresh recruits, the current crew's cooperation was vital for us. And we had no way to get it.

The success of the sports festival rested in their hands, so to speak, which was exactly why they could be so aggressive with us.

They knew this wouldn't happen without their help, so they were threatening us. *We just won't do it—are you okay with that?* And it wasn't just one or two of them, either. Those two girls had brought the group together and fostered the rebellion among the whole crew.

The position of ultimate strength, the superiority of numbers—the people who leverage that power are my enemies.

Those girls were arrogantly challenging us to give in or risk losing their help. *Just who the hell do you think you are? I, for one, am being used constantly, so are you two under the impression you can speak to me that way and get away with it, hmm? Are you mocking me? Don't you underestimate middle management.*

I hate it when being right doesn't solve the problem, and I hate it when logic fails to apply. I also hate myself for assigning rationale to others' behavior so I can be okay with it.

If they weren't going to be logical, then we'd fight fire with more fire. When irrationality has breached the front line, reason has to retreat.

The girls were taking the sports festival hostage. They were telling us with their behavior rather than their words that the festival planning was going to stall if we didn't do as they say. Whether or not they were doing this consciously, that's the result.

We had only one move open to us.

"We could use the same trick…"

"What do you mean?" Yuigahama tilted her head, turning to face me.

"At heart, this is a leadership conflict between us and the crew. They're running a strike, or at least a slowdown, to push through their demands—by taking the sports festival as their hostage."

"…Potage," Yuigahama said for some reason. She wore a serious, pensive expression.

I don't think she gets it… Corn and potatoes had nothing to do with it. Neither do cottages. It sounds similar but means something completely different.

While Yuigahama was stalled out, Yukinoshita frowned and shot me a cold look. *What, you don't like it when I'm trying to be indirect?*

"What, specifically?" she asked.

So I told them the concept I was thinking of. “I’m talking about mutually assured destruction—a hostage situation.”

That was enough for Yukinoshita to catch my drift. Her large eyes widened as she looked at me, and then she breathed a long sigh. “I’m shocked…and amazed you would come up with that. That is legitimately absurd. Or refreshingly malicious, perhaps…”

“Is that a compliment?” I asked back automatically.

Yukinoshita blinked two, three times. “My, it didn’t sound that way?”

“It didn’t…,” I replied.

Yukinoshita’s whole face suddenly lit up with glee. “I’m sure. As I wasn’t complimenting you.”

I thought so. I was just thinking, *As usual, she has no taste in compliments*. It’s scary how you can get used to things. But, well, if she’s grown in any way, it’s her knack for backhanded compliments. I’d prefer it if she could divert some of that growth elsewhere… Of course, I would never say this out loud.

As I was silently cursing her, Yukinoshita let out a giggle so tiny I almost missed it. “But…it’s not a bad idea.” She grinned defiantly. Attack suits her so much better than defense.

“That being the case, some preparatory groundwork will be necessary…,” she muttered to herself, putting her hand to her mouth again as she focused on thought. That giggle almost distracted me, but man, she really is scary…

She’s scary when she’s gleefully plotting her schemes, but she’s also scary when she deduces what I’m trying to do from just one term. The others looked a little confused by our exchange, unable to piece it together themselves.

“Hikigaya, could you explain for us?” Meguri asked.

So I turned to her. “I mean we’re going to take their sports festival hostage, too.”

“Whaaat?” Sagami gave me a doubtful, almost derisive look. She really does piss me off… The way she talks is so dang obnoxious.

But I wasn’t gonna whisper that into Meguri’s ear like a little kid, then be like *I’m not telling youuuu* to Sagami. ’Cause when people do that to you, it will piss you off. It’s genuinely hurtful… If you don’t want me to hear about it, then don’t go out of your way to make sure I know you’re sharing a secret, geez. Little kids do such unbearably brutal things.

I'm not in elementary school anymore. Now I'm a full-fledged high school student. So as a high school student ought, I chose to explain in a snarky, roundabout way. Plus, I just didn't like the idea of genuinely spelling everything out for Sagami.

"We'll take their precious sports festival from them. We'll ruin it. We'll show them, *If you're fine without it, then bring it*."

But maybe that was a little too roundabout. I still wasn't understood, and both Sagami's and Meguri's mouths were hanging open. Yuigahama seemed lost, too.

Meguri and Sagami exchanged looks as if they were checking with one another, *Did you get what he just said?* Meguri looked a bit embarrassed, while Sagami's pride probably got in the way of her asking anything.

One person took a bold step forward. "…S-so what do you mean?" Yuigahama tug-tugged on my sleeve.

Uh, those little tugs are making me kinda shy, so could you quit it…? I gently but smoothly pulled away from her hand and the awkwardness as I explained, "If they're going to implicitly demand that Sagami be removed from her post, then we'll demand *they* be removed. If they're gonna rely on numbers, then we just have to expand the scope."

If they wanted to rely on their position of absolute strength, then we would wield the same sword. If they wanted to strike with the superiority of numbers, then we would cut them with the same blade.

Simply put:

"Fight fire with fire. It's simple," I added at the end.

Yuigahama clapped her hands. "O-ohhh… I get it! I think…" Her conviction quickly evaporated as she approached the end of her sentence.

Well, you had to actually do it, or it wasn't really going to get across. I turned to Yukinoshita, who was gathering her thoughts, to discuss with her how the operation would go in practice.

We dispassionately confirmed what to do, explained the basic plan to everyone there, and discussed solutions to any potential problems. This wasn't a huge undertaking, but we would need some props ready.

Once I had finished explaining everything, Meguri gave an impressed-sounding *ohhhh*. Then she stared at me for a second.

"…Huh, what is it?" I asked, since she was looking at me longer

than it seemed she should.

But she slowly shook her head. “No, it’s nothing… You really are…a horrible guy, Hikigaya.”

She smiled mischievously and giggled.

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While preparing for the next meeting, we also had to make decisions about other adjustments. We had to deal with the breakdown of the committee, but we also had to simultaneously keep the practical work the executives were handling on schedule, or the sports festival definitely wouldn’t happen.

The next day, we’d be dealing with the two big festival events, the unresolved item on the agenda.

We had two major issues to deal with.

The first was the costumes for the Chibattle. We had to come up with a cost-cutting plan and ideas to reduce the amount of labor involved. After my text-based conversation with Zaimokuza the other day, I’d basically come up with a good idea.

After school but before going to the meeting, I immediately began my mission. I had to, or else my target would go home.

When I headed over to talk to her, she was about to do just that, hefting her bag over her shoulder. With each languid step forward, her long, blue-tinged black hair swayed. Keeping it bound was, surprisingly, a handmade scrunchie.

As usual, Saki Kawasaki had this air of fatigue about her. Her eyes, narrowed in displeasure, were already directed toward the exit.

Though I’d sneaked up to her without a sound, I couldn’t quite figure out how to begin the conversation.

“…”

Maybe, Hey! *or something like that? Ugh, too cheery; it’s creepy… I’m not close enough with her to be like,* Whassup. *I guess* Um*, or* Sorry*, or* Hi there *would be safe. But wouldn’t she suspect I don’t remember her name? Still, it’d be rather risky to call her Kawasaki, since I’m not really sure if that’s actually her name. And besides, sometimes the kanji for “cape,” is* saki *and sometimes it’s* zaki. *That’s confusing. Make it consistent.*

As my minor concerns mounted, I groaned in contemplation, alerting Kawasaki to my presence.

"…Eeep!" She seemed startled when she saw me, letting out a short shriek and hastily backing up a few steps. Her eyes had gone round as if she'd met a ninja. It was like she was saying, *Ninja! Why ninja?!*

Uh, no need to be that shocked…

Kawasaki must have been embarrassed by her own reaction, because she suddenly blushed as she glared at me. "…What?"

"Oh, nothing…" With her scowling at me like that, I couldn't bring myself to say anything, either. I mean, she's scary… But she's got a heart of gold, as you might have noticed from her earlier reaction. Yeah. Definitely.

Reassuring myself, I searched for a way to start the conversation. "You going home now?" I asked.

She gave me a blank look. Then she jerked her head away and replied quietly, "…Y-yeah."

"I see."

"…Uh…huh." After that reply, Kawasaki started quietly fiddling with her cuff, and she didn't look at me at all. But she didn't end the conversation and leave, either. She just stood there in silence.

Whoa now, how do I move this conversation forward? I'm getting the sense this isn't going anywhere. Normally, other people will start conversations*…, he says, and he means it.* Neither of us were talking, and it was kind of making me fidgety. *What the heck is with this vibe?*

I really couldn't maintain an indefinite silence here, so I tried to say something. It sounded more like I was muttering to myself, which was creepy even for me: "I see, so you're going home, I see…"

Then, most likely in an attempt to be considerate, Kawasaki glanced over at me and said, "Y-you need something?"

"Ahhh, yeah, yeah. Do you have a minute?" I asked. Her question made it quite a bit easier for me to talk, and finally, I had reached the prologue to the matter at hand.

Kawasaki paused for a moment in thought, then turned away again, and in a just barely audible voice, she replied, "……I do."

I see; that's good. She seems like she'd be busy with this and that, like a job or cram school or family stuff and whatnot, so I'd been a little worried about how she would answer.

But this had made it easier to ask her a favor. Still, this wasn't a small favor, so I couldn't say it too casually. To ensure my request sounded completely sincere, I cleared my throat before asking, "… Could you make some clothes for me?"

And then, as if time had stopped, a long, long silence fell upon us.

Kawasaki's mouth hung open, and she blinked a bunch of times. After a few seconds passed, finally, she seemed able to understand what I'd said. "…Huh? M-me? M-make clothes for you? Wh-why would I…?" She was dithering, waving her hands around in confusion.

I guess I needed to use more words there. I'd thought I'd get agreement from her first and then explain the details. But first, I added, "Oh, not for me personally. I want to use them for an event in the sports festival. Though I don't mean for you to do everything. It's just, if you could teach us how to make some stuff."

"Oh, for the sports festival. I wondered…" Kawasaki's chest moved up and down as she sighed deeply. I could tell she was relieved. "Oh yeah, so you're on the committee or something, huh?" she said as if she didn't really care. She was back to her usual languid manner, nothing like before.

Well, the Sports Festival Committee had hardly been made public, so most people shouldn't be aware of it if they weren't already a part of it.

"You knew about that?"

She replied carelessly, "I heard from Taishi."

It seemed what I'd said to Komachi the other day had spread around. My little sister has a terrifying ability to disseminate information. Also, the Kawasaki siblings are terrifying for talking about that sort of thing with each other. *Why do you guys bother talking about this stuff?*

"Your massive brother complex is showing…," I said with a shiver, and Kawasaki suddenly turned to look me right in the eye.

"I'll hit you," she threatened.

"I-I'm sorry."

Her eyes were so sharp that I automatically offered a sincere apology. When it comes to her brother, she gets serious. It's terrifying. Especially her brother complex.

Shrugging in exasperation, Kawasaki swept the hair off her shoulders. "The committee, huh…? You were involved in that stuff last time, too. How do you keep finding these problems for yourself?"

"That's just what my club does."

"Hmm…"

I replied with a sigh as Kawasaki made that halfhearted listening noise, and the conversation petered out. Unsure what to do with all the silence, she fiddled with the ends of her hair, which didn't seem particularly damaged.

And then, her eyes still focused on her hands, she suddenly

asked in her usual languid way, "…Is that the only reason?"

"Huh? There's nothing else," I answered immediately, without really thinking it through.

Kawasaki quietly lowered her gaze. "I see…" She seemed rather disinterested in the answer to the question she'd asked.

But now I wanted to know why she did. "What about it?"

"No, nothing. It's just that I don't get it."

Well, of course. People never understand others. I could respect Kawasaki's stance as one who was cognizant of that.

More importantly, I wouldn't want to be understood.

When someone thinks they understand a question no one knows the answer to, it's unbearable. I'm not seeking understanding or answers.

When I realized Kawasaki's odd question had pulled the conversation offtrack, I dragged it back. "Oh, so about the clothes."

"Sure, that's no big deal. I've got the free time, now that I'm not working." This time, she replied instantly.

"Oh? Thanks… So come to the meeting room in an hour," I instructed.

Kawasaki seemed startled, eyes widening. "Wait, today?"

"Oh, yeah. You said you have time, right?"

"Yeah, but…" She gave up arguing any further, heaved a sigh, and said quite grudgingly, "Agh, fine, I get it."

Well, I guess it was pretty harsh to suddenly tell her to come that day. But we didn't really have much time. I felt bad, but I was going to make her help us out with this now. "Sorry. I'll make it up to you soon," I said, unusually serious for me.

"…You don't have to," she said, turning away.

X X X

Kawasaki said she'd kill some time hanging around for a while and then come over, so I parted ways with her and headed for the meeting.

Most of the principal members had already assembled.

There was Sagami, the committee chair, then Meguri, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and the members of the student council. The main topic on the agenda for this meeting was the selection of

the captains for the pole pull-down.

For this matter, we'd already settled on Hayama as the strongest candidate for the white team. This did depend on how negotiations went, but Hayato Hayama could never abandon people in trouble. He wouldn't refuse someone coming to ask him for help. This had already been demonstrated in the past, when we'd held that disaster of a judo tournament. So now we just had to decide on a captain for the red team.

And for this event, we couldn't go without asking for assistance from one particular individual.

This was where our exclusive advisor, Hina Ebina, came in.

"Ello-ellooo!" With that nonsensical greeting, Ebina waltzed into the meeting room.

"Yahallo, Hina!" Yuigahama responded with a light wave, and Ebina went straight over to a nearby chair to sit down.

"Thanks for all your trouble," said Meguri.

"Oh, it's all good," Ebina replied with a grin before sliding her gaze over to Yukinoshita and swiftly getting down to business. "Today, we're deciding on the captains for the pole pull-down, right?"

"Yes. As for the white team candidate, we're all right with Hayama, I take it? If so, the committee will submit a formal offer," Yukinoshita said.

Ebina responded with a couple of nods. "Yeah, that seems fine? Although I'm not sure if Hayato'll do it."

"You think he won't?" Sagami said, sounding surprised.

Ebina smiled vaguely. "Hmm… No, I think he will, but we have to actually ask him."

"Hayama'll do it," I said.

Ebina's glasses flashed, and she leaned forward eagerly. The drool dripping from her mouth was sparkling, too. "Oh my, it feels like you have some trust in him…"

"That's not what it is…," I replied. I was half-weirded-out and half-exasperated and 100 percent sure she was wrong. Yes, this feeling was nothing like what she thought it was. In fact, I'd call it the complete opposite.

Hayato Hayama strikes me as someone who wants to solve every problem without conflict. That's why he's mastered that mysterious ability called *the Zone*. His principles amount to "don't rock the boat," so to speak. That's why he'll say yes to any request.

But there was no need to bother explaining that stuff to Ebina. I was too freaked out by the inferno burning in her eyes.

I decided to end that line of conversation by making a reference to what Hayama had said previously. “He asked before if there was anything he could help with, that’s all.”

Yukinoshita nodded then. “You’ve already locked him in to this commitment, hmm?”

Uh, the way you said that. It’s not good… It kind of sounds like I’m deceiving him, okay?

But Yukinoshita didn’t give me the time to correct her, briskly moving on. “That will speed things up. Yuigahama, could you contact him within the day?”

“Okay.” Before Yuigahama even finished saying it, she immediately pulled out her phone and started typing a message. Anyway, as long as we had this hotline, we could assume it was basically settled that Hayama would be the white team captain.

So far, things were going according to plan. The problem was the other team.

Yukinoshita refolded her arms and dropped her gaze to the desk. There was the list of students, split into red and white teams, that the student council had made for us.

“And now for a red candidate, hmm…,” Yukinoshita muttered while meticulously checking over the test.

Beside her, I casually flipped through it as I said, “Well, whoever’s going up against Hayama should be someone equal to him.” This was a major event that all the boys in the school would be participating in, so the captain for this should be someone popular and well-known. On that point, you couldn’t complain about Hayama as a selection. But as for who would compete against him—that was pretty hard.

“Hmm…”

As I was considering, a certain someone shot her hand up. “Ohhh!” It was Ebina.

Panting heavily, glasses fogging up, she started talking before anyone gave her permission. “Hikitani would have a great balance with him! Top-bottom balance, I mean!”

Ha-ha-ha. Hell no.

I laughed mirthlessly in my head. For now, I would ignore her.

“Is there anyone else like Hayama?” I’m not really informed on affairs in the school—more specifically, I’m not interested, so I

turned to someone who I thought was more knowledgeable on the subject.

Yuigahama considered. “Hmm… If it’s someone who stands out like Hayato, then…Tobecchi?”

“With that one, it’s less that he stands out and more that he’s an eyesore, wouldn’t you say?” Yukinoshita retorted without missing a beat.

Wow, mean…

Tobe is a hopeless, trash-level character, but I don’t think he’s a bad guy. You know, seeing as he did act as my scapegoat, after all (involuntarily).

But Tobe was a step down compared with Hayama. And, checking the list, he was on the white team, too. Man, Tobe’s so useless.

Any others on the red team, red team… As I was scanning the list, I found a familiar name. Yoshiteru Zaimokuza… If we wanted an attention-getter, there really isn’t anyone who sticks out like a sore thumb as badly as him. Maybe Superstarman, but that’s it.

But Zaimokuza was too lacking in various ways to compare with Hayama—mainly in common sense. So I eliminated him. If possible, I’d love to eliminate him from my memory.

I couldn’t quite come up with any people who struck me as the right pick. As I was silently looking over the list, Sagami, who’d also been scanning the names, opened her mouth.

“Meguri, what about the third-years?” she asked.

Meguri tilted her head. “Hmm, our grade is a pretty quiet one… I don’t think I can really think of any types like Hayama.”

A reasonable conclusion, given what Hayama had going for him. How many people could there be who were good-looking, smart, nice, athletic, and also popular? Beaujolais may have found a way to annually churn out quality you usually only find once every ten years, but Hayama is a talent truly worthy of the word *outstanding*.

No matter what Hayama’s like, I’m forced to acknowledge his ability.

If the third-years had no one, then you’d consider the first-years, but first-years are too new to be known by the whole school. We shouldn’t take them into account.

“A deadlock, huh?” I moaned, just when Yuigahama clapped her hands as if she’d thought of something.

“Oh, Hayato is a club captain, so then wouldn’t it be fun to choose another club captain for the red team? Like a battle of the captains?”

“A battle of the captains, huh…?” Hmm, if that was the concept we went with, then it might seem natural even if our pick was a little dicey. With their titles, I guess they’d seem like they matched.

As expected of Yuigahama. Her faux-bimbo thing is the real deal. She’s very capable when it comes to planning out things for having a good time and getting people excited.

Yukinoshita nodded appreciatively, then picked up the name sheet. “That sounds like a good idea. And the sports team captains on the red team are…”

“The track club, Ping-Pong club, tennis club…” Meguri nodded thoughtfully as she picked out the relevant information on the reference page.

“And the one who could go head-to-head with Hayama…,” Sagami muttered, running her eyes down the sheet as well. She was also checking everyone’s names.

That was when Yuigahama said, “Oh, Sai-chan is on the red team.”

“T-Totsuka?!” I wasn’t ready for that name.

Ignoring my reaction, Ebina agreed. “Oh-ho-ho. Totsuka did go up against Hayato during the cultural festival, so that might not be a bad ship.”

Don’t say ship. *It just makes me want to oppose this idea with everything I have.*

“Uh, it can’t be Totsuka…,” I said, somehow barely managing to feign calm.

But Yuigahama tilted her head at me. “Why not?”

It’s not logic. Just imagining Totsuka being targeted by a crowd of boys makes every hair on my body stand on end. Ngh, who decided the team assignments? Was it the Sorting Hat? What if something dangerous were to happen to Totsuka? It just should’ve yelled, *Gryffindooooooor!*

But honestly, I couldn’t say that; it would be the creepiest thing ever. In fact, even imagining it was already out of line.

And so I made up an appropriate-sounding reason. “Oh, you know. Like, what are we gonna do if Totsuka gets hurt or something? The tennis club is already superweak to begin with.” If Totsuka had to take time off from the club because he got injured

from the pole pull-down, then I'd be forced to join the tennis club to fill the vacancy I created… Wait. That wouldn't be so bad. If Totsuka and I played tennis together, then we might not only get fifteen-love, but fall in love! Or maybe not. But maybe?

While I was groaning to myself and pondering this, Meguri was examining my face with an uncomfortable, strained smile. "Hikigaya, that's what the girls from the crew are saying, though?"

"Ngh… Y-you're right."

I see—so this is what it means to get swept away by your feelings. I am a bastion of calm, and yet even I stoop to Haruka and Yukko's level when it comes to Totsuka. Totsuka is a fearsome one indeed.

But an argument that comes from emotion is never going to be logical; they won't get even a third of it. I mean, the ending for *Kenshin* said so. So then doesn't that mean that conversely, if you expend triple the love, then it *will* get across? Oh man, that's super-logical! I'm a genius!

…I'm a dumbass.

As I was reflecting, Yuigahama said in exasperation, "And you're worrying too much about it. I mean, Sai-chan is a boy, too."

"Besides, we will be making the rules stricter and taking safety precautions with this event as well, to prevent that from happening."

What Yukinoshita was saying was very reasonable, but it also meant that such measures had to be in place to prevent rule-breakers. *I really am worried…* With such anxieties rising within me, what popped out of my mouth was "But you can't make any guarantees."

"H-Hikigaya? Geez!" Meguri chided me, puffing up her cheeks. It kinda made me feel all fluffy-soft inside. Right as Meguri's Megurin Effect (main use: healing and relaxation, and bestowal of big-sister elemental) calmed me down, Ebina settled the argument.

"And besides, the whole team will be trying to protect the captains, so you don't have to worry so much."

…Protect? Me, protecting Totsuka? Me as Totsuka's knight? I see. I like that. That's good. Let's go with that and hit the Like button!

"Well, you have a point," I said begrudgingly.

Yukinoshita stood up her stack of papers and tapped it against the table to tidy up the loose pages before giving us her conclusion. "Well then, let's ask Totsuka."

"Agreed!" Yuigahama cheered.

It seemed no one else was against it, and a smattering of warm applause rang out.

While we were congratulating ourselves, a *knock-knock* sounded on the door.

Kawasaki had come, as promised.

Now if we could just commit to these Chibattle costumes with Kawasaki's advising, then we'd have figured out the basics of our pending issue, the two big events.

Now everything was ready.

All right, it's time to fight back.

Hachiman & Yui texting one day

Yahallooo! (=^ω^)/! Have you made sure to contact Special Snowflake? (･_･;??

Yeah.

Σ(゜д゜lll) One word?! So short!

Yeah, and it's plenty.

You could say it other ways ((((;゜Д゜)))))))
and use some emotes, at least! >_< It kinda comes off like you're mad… (._.)

I texted him. (^ V ^)
Something like this?

Creepy.

Hey, no one-word answers.

7

And now **the final meeting** breaks into action.

A few days passed, and then the Sports Festival Committee came together in another meeting.

This would probably be the last big meeting before the sports festival. If we were going to correct our course, this was our last chance.

We had to reach ultimate consensus now regarding the point of contention, the two big events, or we would run out of time to actualize the plan. And if the executive side capitulated now, then none of the crew would listen to our directions ever again. This was a critical moment, our Battle of Yamazaki.

As we executives were preparing for the meeting, Miss Hiratsuka showed up. “How are things going?”

“I couldn’t say…,” I answered.

The teacher tilted her head. “Hmm? I’m not sure what that means.”

But this was one thing I couldn’t offer an instant answer for. “Yeah, well, I’m not exactly doing anything myself, so I really can’t say.”

Just as I said, there was hardly anything for me to do in the meeting that day. In fact, you could say doing nothing was my job here. Whoa, it’s my dream job.

It seemed Miss Hiratsuka was trying to divine something from my vague answer. She spun around to scan the others in the meeting room. “I see. Well then, maybe I should ask Yukinoshita or Yuigahama?”

“Naw, I think they’ll say the same thing. I don’t think they know how things are going, either.”

“Hmm. What do you mean?”

Yes, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I would hardly be interfering at all. We were already done with our interfering. It would be someone else standing in the firing line now. Technically, she should have been standing there from the start. She was a little ways away, checking printouts, and I looked over to her. “This time, we’re leaving it to the venerable chair.”

“Oh…?” Miss Hiratsuka narrowed her eyes in deep interest, examining the star of the show today. Minami Sagami.

As far as I could tell, Sagami would have to show them she had what it took to be chair during this meeting, or no matter how it played out, it wouldn’t go well. If we just wanted to make the crew yield, then even we could do that—well, Yukinoshita could anyway.

But if we took care of it, that wouldn’t eliminate the hostility toward Sagami. Since we were acting based on Sagami’s major decision not to quit, then we had to make her do this, no matter how uneasy we were.

Sagami needed results to turn around how everyone saw her—and how she saw herself.

Frankly, this was a bad bet. The chances of success were extremely low. For someone who was so arrogant and tactless and selfish, she was awfully weak-willed and nervous when she was in front of an audience—she was the type of person least suited to being the chair.

But this was still necessary to fulfill both requests that the Service Club had taken on. We’d laid the groundwork, at least, to raise those odds of success a little bit.

…I’m nervous.

“What’s your game this time…? Well, I suppose we’ll see what you’ve got.” Miss Hiratsuka smiled gleefully, then sat down in her usual seat, the folding chair away from the table. The meeting would start soon.

I sat down in my own seat, too.

All the executives were here at the open square of tables at the front of the room. To the side was Yuigahama, and near the middle was Yukinoshita. Right in the middle was Sagami, and beside her was Meguri. On Meguri’s other side sat the members of the student council.

Right before the meeting started, I turned to Yukinoshita. “Guess it’s about time.”

“Right.” Yukinoshita, who had been perusing the paperwork, abruptly lifted her face to check the clock.

I glanced over, too, as I said, “Well, I assume you’ll be the one taking on all the important points, so don’t lose your cool.”

“I’ll be careful.” Yukinoshita gave that short reply.

But she didn’t even have to answer my request. Yukinoshita was rarely shaken in the first place. She’d shown that during the cultural festival, and also during the recent sports festival meetings. I knew she’d have a handle on everything this time, too. But I decided to continue anyway.

“We’re going to maintain a position of superiority. Even if they ask questions, there’s no need to answer honestly. I think the more important thing is show no signs of weakness.”

When I went off in-depth, Yukinoshita shot me a disgruntled look. “Who do you think you’re talking to?”

“Fair enough.”

I had to smile a little at her incredibly in-character response.

Well, of course I wasn’t saying it for Yukinoshita’s benefit. I wanted our venerable chair, who was sitting frozen nearby, to hear it. To prevent this anti-Sagami trend from progressing any further, it was necessary to emphasize her unyielding stance in this meeting. That was why I was uncharacteristically offering a rather roundabout warning. If I said it straight to her, she would have tuned me out…

But I doubt she was absorbing this.

She’s never listened to me. She’s stubbornly ignored me through all the meetings and discussions thus far. In fact, it would feel wrong if she *did* suddenly start listening to me.

Our only concern at the moment was Sagami; the other preparations were steadily being sorted out.

On top of the student council’s desk was a pile of over a thousand sheets. We’d prepared those for this meeting, too. The student council had printed them and carried them in without complaint. They’d been constantly helping us not only with the cultural festival, but with this, too.

And then there were the design sketches for the costumes Kawasaki had finished up for us at express speed. During the meeting the other day, Kawasaki had immediately taken the original plans Zaimokuza had submitted (and all sorts of unnecessary advice from Ebina) and quickly turned them into form.

I'm not sure if I should call this talent surprising, but Kawasaki has a good sense for these sorts of things. Aside from Taishi, her brother who's two years younger, she also has another much younger brother and sister. Maybe, surprisingly, she's learned such skills through taking care of them. It's kinda cute to imagine a reluctant Kawasaki being pestered by her little sister into drawing some pictures.

Checking that we had everything, I quietly waited for the meeting to start. People from the crew were filtering in. The turnout that day wasn't so bad. Last time had ended inconclusively, and that must have been a pull.

There were still a few who had not yet shown up, but when Meguri checked the time, she nodded at Sagami.

"…Well then, it's time. Let's all begin the meeting." Sagami's voice was a little raspy. The curtain had risen on the final meeting.

X X X

The meeting first began with a progress check, but only a few days had passed since the last time. There wasn't much to report, and it proceeded without much enthusiasm.

There wasn't much to ask about, but still, the response from the crew was pretty awful.

Some were louder than others, but a good chunk of them were chatting. Others had their heads down on their desks as they messed around on their phones or napped—it was a picturesque collage of all the ways not to give a damn.

But this was what the executives were worth to them. They weren't even trying to pretend to care—in fact, they might have been doing it on purpose.

This behavior was the embodiment of their spirit of defiance, and these actions were also raising their sense of solidarity.

It was a truly juvenile and spiteful protest, but it was also highly effective. By openly flying the flag of revolt, this faction had strengthened the current anti-executive sentiments under the leadership of Haruka and Yukko. When something has momentum and numbers, people hop on board.

This was just like what happened with the Cultural Festival

Committee.

What was different now was the positions of Sagami, Haruka, and Yukko.

And the other difference was the clear factional dispute between the executives and crew, which meant they couldn't create a common, fictional enemy.

The enemy already existed right here, and now fighting had become their goal.

That was why this time, we had to adopt different measures.

The general mood was just the same as the last meeting. We were still stuck in the same disadvantageous position.

It was also doubtful just how much Sagami was getting across as she headed the proceedings. She was moving us along so smoothly, she might have been reassured by the idea that nobody was listening.

And then, right when she was about to shift to the next topic on the agenda, she paused for a brief moment. She gulped, quietly swallowing her anxiety. "Now then, as for the two big events discussed last time…"

When the topic came up, the crew fell quiet and turned attentive. You could tell this was the main item at the meeting for the day.

To them, this was their greatest point of attack.

Of course, that was also true for us.

Meguri looked at Sagami with apprehension. Also on edge, Yuigahama restlessly moved her hands on top of the table.

With all eyes on her, Sagami said, "Now on to our pending issue, the safety measures for the Chibattle. As outlined in the last meeting, we will address this through the tightening of the rules, coordination with the local fire department, and the establishment of a first aid team."

While Sagami spoke, Yukinoshita closed her eyes, her back perfectly straight as she listened silently. Miss Hiratsuka folded her arms and gave Sagami a skeptical look.

In this cold and tense atmosphere, Sagami continued onward. "And to cut costs, we've also looked into costuming plans. Please check the details on the documents you've been handed. I believe with the designs and materials explained there, we can hold the competition safely and also simplify production," she said, and she pointed to the costume plan for the Chibattle.

The design sketches Kawasaki had finished for us used safe materials and could be divided into different parts and put together in assembly-line fashion. This way, even those with only middling skills could make them, and if you had each person focus on their specific parts, we'd be able to make them efficiently. She'd ensured it was all practical, from production to utility—a pretty good approach, in my book.

When it comes to clothing design, I'm an amateur, but still, I figured this could make some pretty great stuff. But I didn't know if everyone else would think the same.

Of course, we had not forgotten to add a note with a line that said, **Design pending*. As long as you've got this, you can get away with drastic changes in specifications. Maybe from now on, I should start adding **Personal opinion* to everything I say, too. Though that isn't a free pass for absolutely anything.

Once Sagami had finished, Haruka and Yukko shared a look. They gave each other little confirmation nods, then raised their hands.

"I don't think that's much different from how it was before, though…"

"And it doesn't seem like you can make any promises…"

I knew they would say that. In fact, everything until now had been leading them to say that.

I had also anticipated that the rest of the crew would follow Haruka and Yukko's lead and start complaining, too.

"Our tournament's coming up, though…"

"Wait, these guys are saying the same stuff as before. Yikes."

"Yeah, it's like, do your jobs."

However, these complaints and gripes, just loud enough for us to hear, wouldn't quite stop.

Sagami became understandably anxious, glancing over at Meguri and Yukinoshita. We'd explained things to her beforehand, yes, but when you have a bunch of people complaining to your face, you're gonna flinch.

But Meguri and Yukinoshita both nodded at Sagami to put her at ease.

Taking solace in that, Sagami patiently waited.

She didn't open her mouth, move her eyes, or let her posture break. Her hands trembled, clasped over the paper on top of the table, but that was it.

Eventually, the crew seemed to run out of grievances to air, and they slowly quieted. Then they looked doubtfully at our silent chair.

Once they realized the others around them were quieting down, even the loudest of the group shut their mouths without being told. We could all read the room here.

After some waiting, the meeting room went dead quiet.

And when it did, Sagami opened her mouth. “This is the best plan we can suggest. If you’re still not satisfied, if you’re worried about accidents…” As we had discussed beforehand, Sagami paused there.

And then she dropped the bomb.

“Then we can make participation in the sports festival at-your-own-risk.”

The entire crew seemed to be having trouble understanding; they stared at her with confusion and scorn. *The hell?* they silently asked.

Meanwhile, Miss Hiratsuka, sitting at the edge of the room, was dumbstruck. “…You mean to say that anyone who has complaints about the plan as it is doesn’t have to join in?” she asked.

Sagami must not have anticipated that the teacher would say something, as she couldn’t answer that question immediately.

Without missing a beat, Yukinoshita backed her up. “The Chibattle is not the only event that will pose some risk of accident —we can say the same of any of these events. Further, fewer participants will lessen the risk, so I believe it’s a fair judgment.”

“Hmm, that’s true…” Miss Hiratsuka sunk into thought with a *hmm*.

Ignoring her, Sagami moved the discussion forward. She still had yet to announce the biggest part of this proposal. “Furthermore, we will not be permitting nonstudents to participate in the festival in any capacity, including the audience.”

This time, the effect was instantaneous. This was a simple statement, and maybe that was why they got what she meant right away. The crew broke into murmurs.

“What…? Why does it have to be like that?”

“What does that accomplish…?”

Everyone started complaining until the meeting room was in an uproar.

There was basically no justifiable reason for this, so our only option was to make something up.

Sagami couldn't be trusted with that; this was my domain. "The sports festival is a purely in-school event, so…parents, guardians, and friends from other schools can't join in. As a general rule, we won't be allowing outsiders to participate."

I think this was some beautiful BS, if I do say so myself. If the people we were dealing with had been calm, I'm sure they'd have immediately jumped on us: *Hey, that logic is whack*.

But amid all the confusion, no such voices rose from the crew.

Aside from the executives, I think the only calm one there was Miss Hiratsuka. She must still have been thinking about the participate-at-your-own-risk thing from earlier, as she lightly put her hand to her forehead and raised her other hand to signal for us to hold on. "Wait, wait. So how will you deal with those who choose not to participate? You can't just have them do nothing."

"Maybe the same thing as for field trips. People who don't go to those just go to school and self-study or something, don't they?" Yet again, I was just making shit up. That was extremely far-fetched. Field trips have nothing to do with sports festivals. But the school regulation does technically exist, so the chances it would be handled that way were not zero. So there would be room to consider it, at least.

"That may be okay? …Hmm, maybe not? Who makes the decision in such cases? The grade-year head, the gym teacher…no, the vice-principal? Maybe the principal…but since this is a part of the sports festival…" Ignoring Miss Hiratsuka as she mulled over the workplace hierarchy, we moved on with the meeting.

Sagami surveyed the whole room and declared the executives' conclusion: "As we can't one hundred percent guarantee your safety, we've been forced to make this decision."

This was where "risk management" had brought them.

These "concerns" had crushed a number of proposals during the planning meeting as well. Considering that precedent, I knew we'd be able to use such "concerns" as pretense to guide their opinions somewhat. It had already been proven that few people would voice opposition against such reasoning.

The school ranked above both the executives and the crew, and its will could not be opposed. So we would use that against them, placing restrictions on this in the name of *risk management*. If we could use this well, then we should be able to steer this discussion in the direction we wanted.

“Huh? You mean that if we’re against this, then we can’t be in the sports festival?”

“You *can* be in the festival, if you choose to participate.”

“But then that means if we oppose the chicken fight now, then we can’t be in anything.”

The crew were still arguing the matter.

“Don’t you think that’s crazy?”

“We don’t even need to listen to this.”

“Yeah, they’re being ridiculous here. They can’t just kick us out.”

The crew was gradually beginning to show signs of anger. Our jab to throw them off-balance had worked better than expected.

Now it was time for the final blow.

I stood, then picked up the big stack of papers that was piled up in front of the student council. I handed it to Yukinoshita, at the front. She took one of those sheets in hand and slid it over to Sagami.

Quietly accepting the paper, Sagami softly took a deep breath.

“Our proposal has been made to guarantee your safety as much as possible. There’s nothing more that we can do. If you are still in opposition, then this goes beyond this committee. We will ask the full student body.” She pointed to the stack of over a thousand papers that was piled up high on the table.

Miss Hiratsuka stood up, pulled out one of those papers, and looked over it. Then she smiled wryly. “‘Will you participate in the sports festival or not…’ It’s unprecedented to ask the students something like this about the sports festival…” Waving the page, she said to Sagami, “How will you explain this to the other students?”

“All…of it…”

“Huh?” Miss Hiratsuka blinked. That wasn’t the answer she was expecting.

Yukinoshita supplemented with details. “We’ll explain the full situation. The facts—all of them. That certain clubs have indicated an issue, that our proposed countermeasures were unable to satisfy their demands, and so we’d like to ask the opinions of all students in the school. That is what we intend to explain.”

On the surface, it was an explanation, but in reality, it was a threat.

In other words, we would essentially be exposing them.

The ambiguity of the phrase *certain clubs* wouldn't stop people from being suspicious or prying into it. Some people would try to find out just who those opponents had been—not necessarily for malicious reasons, maybe just to satisfy their curiosity or sense of justice.

Compared with the cultural festival and field trips, the sports festival isn't the sort of event everyone would be looking forward to all that much. But to those who were starving for a classic youth experience, this was one of the important highlights of their time in high school. If they lost it for a stupid reason, people would do something about it. A lot of them, most likely.

For the first-years, this would be their first high school sports festival, while for the third-years, this would be their final one as students. I'm sure this big event was special to plenty of second-years, too.

This is extremely wild and hopeful speculation on my part, but I'd say over half of them would be looking forward to the sports festival happening. Depending on how this played out, the sports festival itself could go away for good. If things went badly, this faction of sports clubs could very easily come under fire for that.

If the crew could envision that possibility, they might not oppose us so glibly.

There was no need to actually question their true motives. We just had to show them that the preparations had already been made, and it was possible to put this plan into action.

Even if the odds of it happening were low, we just had to make them think it would.

They were playing like they were the majority, so we'd teach them just how empty their belief was. We'd teach them the fear of an even greater majority, one that may not exist—but it might.

Of course people started arguing back.

"Y-you don't have to do that—we should just drop the chicken fight."

"That doesn't mean we're against the whole sports festival…"

But Haruka, Yukko, and those around them had all lowered their voices considerably. The prospect of exposure must have scared them; they were already loosening their grip.

This was check. Just one last push, and then checkmate.

"We'll tell them about the chicken fight as well… The committee *had* reached an agreement, but thanks to some

complaints, we had to resort to this," Sagami finished her explanation.

Yukinoshita added earnestly, "If an approved item is overturned…it would be a scandal. Once word gets out, the responsibility of the committee will be called into question… Agh…" This plan would also make us look bad, so no one would expect her to jump on the idea.

Which was why the sight of Yukino Yukinoshita hesitating was so effective. One of the most capable girls in school, and our de facto chair, had apparently run out of options, highlighting the extremity of our predicament.

The commotion within the meeting room crescendoed.

We'd given them the impression that we were doing this with full knowledge of the risks, and that we were appropriately prepared. If they were going to take the sports festival captive by digging in their heels, then we'd do the same.

You bastards are dreaming of the perfect sports festival, and your fantasy will be our hostage.

Both parties had their fingers on the buttons to nuke the sports festival we wanted.

This was our mutually assured destruction.

Haruka and Yukko were trembling.

"What…? C'mon…what the hell?"

"I think that's an awful way to handle this."

"Just because you're the committee chair doesn't mean we have to listen to you."

Their hateful words focused on Sagami. Of course. She'd been standing in the firing line this whole time. She was destined to be the target, and she had no choice but to take it.

There's no such thing as a comfortable seat of leadership. Those in the most prominent position are vulnerable to the most wounds and blood splatter.

If you can't reconcile everything peacefully, then you can at least take down as many problems as you can in one fell swoop. The one who stands at the top must generally select one option here.

Nonetheless, it's a painful duty. Criticism against the post or title of the chair are bearable, at least. But in many cases, it's lumped in with you yourself. The position and the person are different things at their core, but to an outside viewer, they are

indivisible.

Meaning that if this developed further, the opposition to Sagami would likely turn into personal attacks against her.

“You’re hardly doing any work here, and now all of a sudden you’re the big leader doing whatever she wants.”

“Unbelievable… You didn’t even come to the first meeting on time…”

From the title of committee chair, it slid straight into talk about Sagami’s personality. At the center of this were, of course, Haruka and Yukko, who knew her. Since they’d gotten along so well before, they could strike at Sagami’s flaws with sharper accuracy than the others.

“Hey, that’s enough.”

“Y-yeah. Calm down a little, ’kay?”

Miss Hiratsuka and Yuigahama tried to put a halt to it, but Haruka and Yukko had already lost their heads. It was like they didn’t even hear the attempts to soothe them; in fact, they were getting louder and louder.

“You didn’t even care about doing the cultural festival right, so where the hell is this coming from?”

“W-well…” Sagami started to waver as her past loomed before her. The cultural festival couldn’t have been a good memory for her, either.

But if she showed weakness, they’d strike even harder. Haruka and Yukko were on a roll. “That guy over there said some really nasty stuff about you, but now you’re friends just ’cause it’s convenient for you?”

“You never cared about us, did you? I mean, you’re working together with someone you literally hate.”

Haruka and Yukko usually come off as comparatively docile, but when they got emotional, there was a bloodcurdling edge to the fury on their faces. The intensity of it kept the others from being able to butt in. Of course, the same went for me.

“H-hey now, hold on there. Hikki really isn’t so bad as all that.” Yuigahama attempted to stamp out the sparks as they started flying over to me. But this wasn’t her issue to solve.

I stood up and chose my words carefully. “Uh, well, it’s true Sagami hasn’t always been the most…y’know, but this—,” I began, but I was cut off by a low voice.

“…Shut up.”

Looking over to the source of that voice, I saw Minami Sagami hunched over. Was that her? I took a step forward to check, and Sagami raised her chin, this time saying clearly, “Just stop talking. Shut up. Every single time— Who the hell do you think you are?”

Her words were filled with hostility. This was the first time since the cultural festival that she’d blown up at me like this. I started to snap back at her, but someone cut me off before I could.

Sweeping her hair off her shoulders, Yukinoshita glared at Sagami. “Sagami, what you’ve just said—”

“Shut up!” But Sagami wasn’t going to listen; she was saying the same thing to Yukinoshita now, and she was as determined as Haruka and Yukko were moments ago. “You guys just decide everything yourselves, and nobody listens to what I say—who the hell do you think you are?! What do *you* know?!” She sucked in a shuddery breath, and her voice was tight as she said, “I’m doing it right, aren’t I…?”

Was she really saying that to Yukinoshita and me? Her cry was not only an attack against us, but also against Haruka and Yukko.

“I’ve been trying my best to do it right this time! Why don’t you get that? I apologized, and I’ve been thinking about what went wrong and how to do better…”

I couldn’t see the expression on Sagami’s downturned face, but I could see the drops falling to the floor. Her voice gradually descended into mumbles before breaking off for a moment. But nobody else could say anything.

Sagami muttered hoarsely, repentantly, “That’s why I wanted to do it right this time… That’s why…” She choked, and her words were replaced with sobs.

“Sagami,” Meguri said to her kindly, rubbing her back. But Sagami showed no sign of collecting herself. She kept crying.

“Shiromeguri, could you take her someplace she can calm down?” said Miss Hiratsuka, and Meguri nodded. She took Sagami’s hand and slowly pulled her up, then took her out of the meeting room.

The rest of us watched them go without a word.

Silence fell, like no one could figure out what to say. Including Haruka and Yukko, who’d been full of venom only moments ago. The room was perfectly still, with none of the murmuring from before.

In all the scenarios I’d envisioned, I’d never imagined anything

close to this.

It wasn't logical. It wasn't coherent. It wasn't rational.

Sagami's cries had been an argument from emotion—the belief that attitude was what counted most.

I thought I'd constructed my logic to block all her outs, but it had produced a failure. To be blunt, I had miscalculated. It was nothing like mutually assured destruction.

She had sobbed and yelled for them to just acknowledge her already. That was all it had been.

I'd lost.

Yeah, she actually beat me.

It was so stupid, ridiculous, lowbrow, and trivial—so simple. How could I not have noticed?

This problem had originated with an emotion-based argument in the first place. So only an emotional argument could turn it around.

Anger for anger, an attack for an attack. You counter pathos with pathos.

In a mudslinging competition like that, whoever calms down first loses. Sagami had already exited the stage, while Haruka and Yukko were fast to snap out of it because of the people around them. They were sitting in silence as if they were embarrassed by the looks everyone was giving them.

It was hard to even twitch in a silence like this, but Miss Hiratsuka lightly cleared her throat. When nobody else knew what to do, the only one who could handle a situation like this was a teacher.

Sweeping her gaze over the room, she said, "Let me ask again. Is there anyone who opposes the proposal from the chair and the others?"

If anyone did, they would be a villain. No one here could really encourage more dumping on someone who had just been sobbing miserably in front of a crowd.

So nobody raised their hands, and Miss Hiratsuka nodded with satisfaction. "Mm-hmm. Then it's settled for good now."

"All right, then I'll explain the specifics about our course moving forward." In place of the absent Sagami, Yukinoshita took the helm, and the meeting resumed. Despite her calm voice, the tension still lingered.

I leaned heavily into my chair and sighed.

X X X

The committee finally started to make progress thanks to the meeting the other day, but everything was still far from resolved. It was just ambiguous now. At least more people had accepted that the decision was inescapable and resigned themselves to showing up to work.

Of course, it wasn't like every single person was raring to go, but it had raised the bar to a manageable level. Still, we had to play catch-up in the areas where we'd fallen behind. So in the end, the executives were still helping with crew work.

For the production of the Chibattle costumes, Kawasaki, Ebina, and Yukinoshita were in charge, making free use of sewing machines and whatnot and managing a few girls. The most capable people were taking charge of the core elements.

Meanwhile, Zaimokuza and the student council were snipping away at cardboard boxes and Styrofoam and stuff to construct helmets and armor. It seemed the student council members possessed the sort of benevolent charity you'd expect from people who occupied such a role, as they treated Zaimokuza well.

And as for Minami Sagami, she was mainly with Meguri, managing special duties that didn't involve the crew. After the scene she'd made, it was no wonder she had trouble working together with them.

And as for me, I was passed around like an unwanted fruitcake. Same old, same old.

That day, my job was putting together some documents for the newly established first aid team. I made a list of the medical supplies we'd probably need, considered where to establish the additional tent, assembled the contact numbers for emergencies… *Oh, wait up. Who was supposed to be in charge of the first aid team? The assignments for the executives were already handed out… Damn it, I wish I hadn't noticed…*

You've seen this before, haven't you? Yes, the law of conservation of work: When you're working, the work just piles up and up. It's a devilish system. The moment you've dealt with one task, new work is generated. What's even more frightening is that since I'd put together all these documents for the first aid team, now the odds that all such work would go straight to me were

extremely high.

I wondered if anyone, literally anyone else, would do it instead, but on the day of, about everyone trustworthy—the student council included—would be deployed to give directions to everyone, so we'd be shorthanded. Even if we had the crew helping out, the executives would be needed as supervisors. Sagami and Meguri would be stationed in the committee tent at all times, so then…

Damn it, why did I have to realize this? My own excellence has me trapped now…

I was despairing alone, losing my motivation and zoning out, when suddenly the meeting room door opened.

"Yahallo!"

I could immediately tell who had come. *Wait, she wasn't here before?* I watched Yuigahama with half-lidded eyes as she ambled over.

"…Where were you?" I asked.

"Huh?" She blinked. And then for some reason, she blushed. "With our class… Wait, were you worried that I wasn't here and came looking for me? That's kinda surprising, but… Some surprises are kinda nice."

"Don't be dumb. I meant, like, what were you doing if you weren't working?" *What's she even talking about…? I don't get it; and I think I'll get embarrassed if I actually think about it, so could you not?*

"Oh, that's what you mean… Wait—rude! I was actually working!" One moment, she was flustered over that strange misunderstanding, and the next, she was indignant. She always did have that restless energy, I never got tired of watching her.

She seemed quite offended that I'd said such a thing, so I decided to ask her what she'd been up to. "So what kind of work was it?"

Yuigahama's expression lit up again, and she began chattering. "Oh, we just assigned jobs a little while ago, right? I was looking over that stuff again, and there's only one person on the PA. And I figured that's kind of weird."

"Uh, not really. They just have to do music and announce when we're looking for someone, so you don't need a lot of people," I said.

Startled, Yuigahama froze. "…Huh? You think?"

"Yeah."

"Oh…" This time, her shoulders visibly slumped.

“Is there a problem?” I asked, wondering if she’d done something stupid.

“Ah-ha-ha.” Yuigahama laughed awkwardly as she mussed up her bun. “Oh, I thought for sure there’d be, like, live coverage or commentary or something…”

“This is a high school sports festival. We don’t need that stuff.”

“O-oh.”

“Yeah,” I said firmly.

But Yuigahama’s fidgeting suggested she had something difficult to say. As I waited for her to speak, she just barely moved her lips to quietly mutter, “……But I already asked someone to do it and brought them here.”

“Send them back.”

“Huh?!”

“Don’t *huh* me. Don’t add work where we don’t need it.”

“H-hold on a minute!” she said, sticking her hand into her blazer pocket to pull out her cell phone. Then she dialed a number. “Ah, hello? It’s me, yeah…,” she said, then wandered a little ways away.

Just who was she calling? While I watched, she ended the call surprisingly quickly, then immediately came back. “Yukinon said it’s okay! So it’s okay, right?!”

…What’s with this conversation? It’s like when a kid picks up a stray puppy. But if Yukinoshita said it was fine, then, well, she had to have something in mind. Or maybe she just was soft on Yuigahama.

But if Yukinoshita was agreeing, then resistance was futile. Might as well give in. “Well, if the others are fine with it, then okay…”

“I’ll go ask!” Before she’d even finished the sentence, she zoomed off to where Meguri and Sagami were. But as far as I could tell, everyone would probably give the okay. *I mean, they really spoil her…*

And as anticipated, when I looked over to Meguri and the others, Yuigahama was making a big circle with her arms. That would be a yes.

She continued off to the door, bringing over her recruit.

Said individual was grumpily pulling at her springy blonde curls as she looked around the room.

“…But why Miura?” I asked Yuigahama quietly.

Yuigahama lowered her voice, too. “I mean, she’s good at public speaking, and if she does this, Tobecchi and lots of other people will come help, right?”

Well, that made sense. If Miura and company were acting as announcers, that would be enough to add more excitement to the event. Yuigahama had been thinking over this stuff, too, huh? I was impressed.

Yuigahama added with a mischievous smile, “…Plus, she’s been getting kinda grumpy whenever me and Hina have been talking about committee stuff. I think she feels left out.”

What the heck, Miura, that’s cute. That was well worth imagining.

However, the Miura right in front of me at that moment was anything but cute. She was scary, in fact.

She was looking at us as if she wanted to say something. What—was she demanding compensation? But this was volunteer work. We had no coin for her but a token of thanks.

“…Um, sorry. We appreciate it.” Unusually for me, I was more or less sincere. Yukinoshita’s so fussy about manners; this has to be the fruit of her education. Or maybe I was finally broken.

But it seemed this was not to Miura’s satisfaction, as she replied curtly, “Whatever. I just came ’cause Yui asked. I never said for sure I’d do it.”

“Huh?! That’s not what you said before!” Yuigahama was startled, and Miura snootily looked away.

The queen is fickle, so there’s no helping that.

Or so I thought, ready to let her have her way, but it appeared that wasn’t the reason Miura’s head had turned.

She was looking at Sagami.

When Sagami noticed Miura was back, she walked up to us, probably intending to greet her classmate. It seemed that even after the experience she’d had, she still couldn’t get out of such superficial associations.

“Miura,” Sagami addressed her, but Miura just nodded. “So you’re the one who’s going to be helping out…,” Sagami said, sounding kind of confused. She had to have some complicated feelings about Miura.

I don’t think Miura liked her attitude much. “Like I said, I haven’t actually decided I’m gonna do it,” she replied coldly

“O-oh…” Sagami shrank slightly from Miura’s piercing gaze.

Miura huffed in irritation, folding her arms.

I felt like I'd just seen the same thing before, in the classroom.

But what came after was different.

Sagami kept on the awkward smile, but then she surprised me. "We've been short on people, and I think if you did this for us, it would make things fun for everyone. Can I ask you to do this? … Please?"

And then she bowed her head.

It felt a little obsequious, but this was something I would never have seen before between Sagami and Miura. Miura must have felt something, too; she unfolded her arms and looked away, fiddling with the curled hair she was so proud of, spinning it around her fingers. It was like she was taking the time to think of how to reply.

"…Hmph. Well." And then she replied with indifference.

Yuigahama giggled, smiled, and translated for us. "She says she'll do it."

"Hey! I didn't say that!"

With a bit of a smile, Sagami watched the two of them teasing each other.

There had been some improvement—though slight—in the relationship between Sagami and Miura.

Conflict allows us to see where we stand in relation to one another. Through Sagami's collision with Haruka, Yukko, and the rest, she'd learned at what distance she could position herself to keep from hurting others.

It might look like Sagami was just sidestepping potential harm, but this was still proof that Sagami had changed. She had learned how to measure the distance between herself and Miura.

I didn't know how she would measure the distance between herself and Haruka and Yukko from now on.

But now, she had gotten it out of her system and let people see the truth. A slight self-pitying smile was still on her lips, as if she was ashamed of the disgraceful spectacle she'd made, but maybe Sagami might actually be able to measure that distance well.

8

That's why **their festival** won't end.

As I stood in the school courtyard, the wind whipped up clouds of sand.

I put on a red headband and the first aid team armband, then marched off to the committee tent.

I surveyed the restless, anxious masses around me. They were wearing gym uniforms like me, with red or white headbands in their hands or wrapped around their foreheads, and some of them even had them around their necks.

Some were enthusiastic right from the get-go, while others were complaining ("Man, this is such a drag").

If it's such a drag, Tobe, then why did you take such obvious care in tying your headband?

We were blessed by clear weather, and the wind was cool and pleasant. Perfect for some light exercise. Even the walk over to the committee tent felt like a leisurely stroll.

I'd call it the perfect weather for a sports festival.

If I hadn't had to work as a part of the committee, then I could have enjoyed the pleasant weather outside and the occasional diversion, like watching girls in gym uniforms, or watching girls running like the wind, or watching Totsuka in his gym uniform, but unfortunately, that was not to be.

That day, not only did I have to work as a part of the committee, I was also stationed at the first aid tent, so I couldn't watch Totsuka running like the wind, or Totsuka doing a crouching start, or Totsuka getting tangled up in the net in the obstacle-course race and writhing sexily. If you get a job, you really do lose.

"The important thing in life is not to triumph but to compete."

This is a widely known quote from a speech by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the father of the modern Olympics. But the quote is often misused, and there's the tendency for it to be used as a threat to force people to participate—though there are a ridiculous number of things in life where it's useless even to go.

If competing is so important, then competing against the trend of competing is just as important; if everything is an experience, then there should also be value in the experience of not experiencing something. In fact, isn't not doing something that everyone experiences in itself a valuable experience?

"He's at it again."

I turned around to see an exasperated Yuigahama, who'd come to the tent just like I had. Oh, did I say that out loud?

"None of it makes any sense, but his arguments are convincing in the most useless way, and that's what makes it so awful," Yukinoshita, who'd come with her, added with a sigh.

Anyway, this was my first time seeing Yukinoshita in her gym uniform. A tracksuit isn't her style. It's so unbefitting that the vast difference between her usual look and this one actually does suit her, in a strange way.

But anyway, I had my own point to make. "No, wait. This isn't my fault; it's society's. I'm, like, a necessary evil."

Good guys can't exist without bad guys. My existence as a teen failure enables others to enjoy a brilliant youth. This is because people love comparisons. Just the thought that you're more fortunate than someone else can make you happy.

But Yukinoshita said carelessly, "The majority of self-proclaimed 'necessary evils' are just evil."

"Yeah, you can't even say for sure if they're necessary." Context-wise, I think Yuigahama was just talking about me.

"Um, hey, could you please stop implying that I'm unnecessary?" I weakly protested.

I heard a cheery laugh from inside the tent. It was Meguri. She must have started work before us.

Meguri seemed pretty excited now that the sports festival was here, trotting up to us to give Yukinoshita and Yuigahama shoulder hugs. "You guys all have such perfect teamwork!"

I think all three of us were probably glancing around like, *What teamwork…?*

But Meguri wasn't bothered. "Okay! Let's do this! Hip hip

hooray!”

“Uh, hooray…”

How can she be so motivated…? We were slightly weirded out but went along with it anyway. That call-and-response must have been enough to satisfy her, as she nodded along.

Meguri pulled the girls’ shoulders into a tighter hug. Yuigahama blushed a little, startled and shy, while Yukinoshita twisted around in an attempt to escape.

Leaning her face close to the two of them, Meguri closed her eyes. Slowly, savoring the moment, she said, “Thank you, guys, for your advice. I think this’ll be really fun because of you.”

The excitement in her voice had been replaced with serenity.

The original request we’d accepted had been from Meguri. This sports festival would be her last one, and it would probably be the final major event she’d be involved in as student council president. We would make it an exciting success.

She already looked overwhelmed with emotion, but Yukinoshita, in her grasp, gently brushed aside Meguri’s arm and said coolly, “Oh, no, it’s too early for that, Meguri.”

“Huh?” Meguri replied with surprise.

“Well, we’ve only finished half your request.”

It was true that the request was not yet over. I recalled the extra line at the end.

Taking the dazed Meguri’s arm, Yuigahama squeezed it tight. “That’s right! We’ve worked for this, so let’s win!”

Meguri had written in that e-mail that she wanted to win.

This was the one thing that was out of our control. Games are about the luck of the moment, after all. You won’t know until you’ve done it. Still, we could make some effort to raise the odds.

Meguri looked at each of us in turn. When our eyes met, I felt like I could see something sparkling in her eyes. “…Yeah, let’s do our best!”

She swiped across her face once, pretending to wipe a tear from her eye, then smiled her gentle, fluffy smile.

X X X

And we did have every intention of winning, but the situation

wasn't great.

After dealing with various matters pertaining to the opening ceremony, I was finally about to take a break when the games started up. Finally, the sports festival had begun.

The event I was participating in was basically a run, and that was it. Once I was done with that, I spent all my time spectating from the first aid tent, and the red team wasn't doing well.

Through the morning, I'd been thinking, *Yeah, well, maybe we can win* as I watched, but by the afternoon, the red team's losing position was becoming clear.

Loss summons further loss—once the losing-battle feeling hits, motivation drops, too. Here and there, I began to see people deliberately slacking off. *Pfft, I wasn't* trying *or anything*, their attitude protested. *What, you thought I was taking it seriously?* Others were pulling stunts for laughs.

If the ones trying to be funny were the usual suspects for class clownery, then their unfunny jokes wouldn't have been so bad. I could get it. But once the normal ones—even the quiet types—are succumbing to the shenanigans, that spells disaster. I saw a few people over in the corner saying stuff like *That was going too far, man.* It was unbearable. I may have been on the first aid team, but we really couldn't heal the wounds of the heart…

At a school-wide event, it's safest to act according to your social status.

In fact, are you really being an individual if everyone else is aping for attention, too? Eccentricity does not equal individuality.

The one I might call the personification of that was the central figure of the white team, Hayato Hayama.

Hayama wasn't particularly trying to stand out. He was just running the relay and gliding through the obstacle course, but he still had something that made him shine. What's more, in every event he was in, he took first across the board. Of course, this got the girls excited.

Even between games, Hayama, the MVP of the white team, was smiling with a hint of embarrassment at the center of a ring of girls. The reason the sight wasn't more unpleasant was probably because Tobe and the others were also in the circle, having fun and chattering away.

But the only ones who could look upon such a sight with a smile were outsiders like me, or Hayama's own circle of friends—

only the people on the white team. The boys on the red team were shooting him resentful glares. Zaimokuza in particular. His scorn was intense. *Even mine aren't that rotten.*

The exploits of Hayama the MVP combined with the plummeting motivation of the red team after our losses, and the white team was proceeding at an advantage for the whole thing.

When we were approaching the late stages of the competition, I looked up at the scoreboard in the school window and saw they had a pretty big lead. While the white team had 150 points, the red team had 100.

…Maybe this is hopeless now. I dunno.

When I gazed at the distant board with a sigh, I heard a similar sigh from beside me. I looked over to see Yuigahama groaning grumpily.

Well, I understood the feeling. *It's kinda awkward, after that grand gesture…*, I was thinking when I saw someone else glaring at the scoreboard with even more gravity.

Quietly folding her arms, Yukinoshita muttered, "…What games remain?"

There was an indescribable force in her tone, and I answered honestly without even thinking. "Huh? Oh, now there's just the two big events: the Chibattle and the pole pull-down."

"I see…" She said nothing after that.

Yuigahama and I exchanged a look. And then cluing in, we both nodded.

She's at it again…

They say that flames that quietly burn blue are hotter than dramatic bright-red flames. Right then, that was Yukinoshita.

She wasn't giving up at all—she was still thinking about winning. She was as competitive as you can get.

X X X

We had a short break, then began preparing for the final two big events. While the captains for the chicken fight were getting changed, we had the other students get lined up.

Though I was with the first aid team, for such a large-scale event like this one, I was also forced to join in and help.

Also, Zaimokuza, the progenitor of this event, had come to help as well, even though nobody had asked for him. He was wearing an armband that said "Production High Command" that looked homemade. I don't know if this was an expression of his sense of responsibility, or if he just had nothing better to do that day because I couldn't deal with him, but it was probably the latter. And so I graciously never mentioned the armband to him.

While I was organizing and guiding the lines along with Zaimokuza, the student council, and a few of the crew, I heard some excited chatter.

I turned around at the moment when all the captains were coming over, with Ebina at the head. Yukinoshita was checking her headband as she came to ask me, "You're done forming the lines?"

"Yeah," I answered briefly and gestured to them. *Please go ahead and take a look, ma'am.* Now they just had to wait to head out onto the field, no problem. Still, there was one thing that did worry me. Better ask about that. "…So what are you wearing?"

"…I'd like to know that myself." Yukinoshita expelled a deep, deep sigh.

She was wearing a loud, overdecorated, and slightly suggestive dress of armor. The materials looked a little cheap, but the flashes of skin between the gap in her arm guards and her shoulders exposed by the open back were very pretty. The breastplate and the arm guards made it look a little heavy, but the lightly fluttering skirt gave a nice, soft contrast.

The armored dress was pretty well-done, considering it had been made in a hurry, but I noticed something strange.

How odd… When I saw the design, I could've sworn it was Japanese-style. When did it wind up like this…? It seems there are many black boxes in the production here that I was not made aware of…

Yukinoshita was also worrying over her arm guards, leg guards, and collar and such as if she didn't know why she'd wound up in an outfit like this.

I wonder what everyone else thinks about this…, I mused, searching for Yuigahama. *Gahama, Gahama… Oh, there she is.*

Yuigahama was patting at her breastplate, touching the arm guards, and tugging at the skirt experimentally. Then she blushed bright red. "Wow, this is super-embarrassing…"

Well, it's cosplay in front of all the students in the school, after all…

Ebina appeared satisfied by her shame. Kawasaki stood beside

her, also now in costume. *Oh, Kawasaki's wearing one, too, huh? But she looks really grumpy about it… Bet she's really not a fan of that…*

Then she noticed my gaze and gave me a super-red-faced glare. "…What?" Anger seeped into her voice. Terrifying.

But I doubt saying It's nothing *would improve her mood…so I'll just say whatever.* "Oh, uh, well, it looks good on you."

"…Are you trying to start a fight with me?" Kawasaki responded with an even more threatening tone than before.

That was a compliment… Okay, I get it, I'm sorry. I won't look anymore, so please stop glowering at me…

After she glared daggers at me, I quietly averted my eyes. They landed on Ebina. She was in cosplay, too, but she had no shame.

"…Are we really gonna go out in these?" Yuigahama asked, looking incredulous, or maybe suspicious, patting at her own costume. The end of her waist cord slipped loose, and Kawasaki breathed a beleaguered sigh, circled around Yuigahama, and tucked it back in.

As if attempting to wash away Yuigahama's unease, Ebina clapped her on the shoulder. "I mean, it's a battle. The captain's gotta make sure to wear her armor."

"Yeah, but…" Yuigahama twisted around.

"Don't move," Kawasaki said sharply, and Yuigahama yelped and went silent.

"But now that we're wearing these costumes, it really is…" Yukinoshita's expression darkened slightly.

But it seemed Ebina wasn't bothered. "Come on, they're great! Designed by me! Made by Saki-Saki's Special Costuming!"

"Don't call me Saki-Saki."

You guys sure are friendly, huh…? I felt like Ebina and Kawasaki had gotten closer since the cultural festival, surprisingly.

Once Kawasaki was done doing the final costume checks for everyone, she gave them the nod.

Making sure it was all good to go, Yukinoshita did a spin. *If ease of movement is what matters to her, then she really is playing this to win, huh?*

Yuigahama, on the other hand, still seemed unused to her costume, staring at it with impressed-sounding noises.

Once she was finished checking the range of motion, Yukinoshita gave a satisfied *mm-hmm*, then said, "But anyway…why are these Western-style?"

Yuigahama tilted her head, equally dubious. “Yeah…isn’t this supposed to be a samurai thing?”

Yeah, just who the heck made these costumes Western-style? Seeking an answer, I looked over at the source of the initial idea, Zaimokuza, and at Kawasaki and Ebina, who would have offered input.

Zaimokuza and Ebina both pushed up their glasses. With the light of the sun on them, the lenses flashed.

“”Isn’t it obvious? I just like it that way!””

Oh, I see… There’s no arguing against personal taste…

Maybe this is just how it is on the factory floor, with manufacturing. One way to make things is to realize the idea according to one individual’s plan; another is to allow a few different people to pursue their individual tastes and hope for a chemical reaction.

In that case, there was no cause for disappointment here, except for the ones wearing them. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were both giving them dull stares.

Meguri, also in costume, walked up to the two of them. She’d been watching them—and enjoying it, if her smile was any indication.

She wrapped an arm around Yukinoshita’s and Yuigahama’s shoulders and smiled brightly. “Come on, now, this is gonna be fun! It’s all good, right?! Let’s turn this game around!” she said as she beckoned them both to the waiting line. It was time to go out onto the field. Ebina and Kawasaki started heading to their positions with the white team forces.

I bid them good luck with a casual wave.

Right as they were passing by…

“If we win this match, it’s thirty points, isn’t it…?”

“Yeah, and if we also win the boys’ game after this, then we can turn this around…”

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama turned back to give me a look. I understood what they were trying to say. The big events were worth thirty points each. If we could win both, then the red team could come back to win the whole competition.

“Yeah, but it’s not that easy…,” I muttered.

We wouldn’t necessarily be able to win in the next event. The white team had been dominating this whole time, so the odds of winning were low.

To say nothing of the fact that the opposing captain was Hayama. He had a knack for this stuff, and with his charisma, the white team's morale was high. Meanwhile, the red team had halfway given up…

It was unreasonable to ask us to win this.

I felt like Yukinoshita would understand without my saying anything, but she didn't break her gaze.

"…I keep my promises," she said, then strode off.

Yuigahama flung her hand into the air and grinned. "Yeah!"

"A one-sided declaration isn't a promise…," I muttered, even though I knew they wouldn't be able to hear.

X X X

The battle lines of the red and white teams lined up made for a grand spectacle all on their own, but the captain riders especially stood out from the crowd.

The captains of the red team were Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and Meguri. Opposing them on the white team were Miura, Kawasaki, and Ebina.

The real story was that there hadn't been enough time to pick out captains for the Chibattle as well, so we'd mostly just gone with the executives and people we knew.

Everyone knew Meguri, obviously, and both Miura and Yukinoshita had school-wide recognition, so no issues there. Kawasaki wasn't particularly well-known, but visually, she was no less striking than the other girls. Kawasaki herself had apparently been against it, but Ebina had wormed her way into convincing her.

Once the captain riders got set up astride their "horses," the players were all ready.

And then there was a shriek of feedback

"Check, check, check…" I heard a voice testing the microphone.

Until now, Miura and Ebina had been the ones doing a casual but exciting commentary and announcements. But all the girls were participating in this event, the Chibattle. For now, they'd switched over the people sitting in the broadcasting seats.

Miura must have ordered them to do this, as it was the usual three stooges sitting in the booth with the mikes.

“Now we’re finally at the finale of the sports festival! So far, the white team’s been in the lead. With Hayato Hayama’s efforts as the chief point-scorer, we’re coming into this match at an advantage.”

That announcement was oddly biased… “*We’re* coming into this match,” huh…? As expected of Ooka the Virgin. He has absolutely no neutrality.

“But we still don’t know where this game will go…,” Yamato’s dignified voice, on the other hand, stirred up the red team’s hopes.

As the excitement rose among both forces, the announcement reached its most obnoxious volume yet. *“Finally, the main event of the festival! This is the girls’ Chiba Citizenry Cavalry Battle—for short, the Chiiiiibattle!”*

Tobe’s strange announcement got the whole crowd chattering noisily. *Chibattle* is one of those things you hear and you’re a little like, *What?*

“Now the captains of both forces are all out in formation. In the Chibattle, whoever knocks down the most captains will be the winner.” That was Ooka’s simple explanation of the rules.

There were three captain riders on each side. The players would be protecting them as they either brought down the opponents’ “horses” or stole away their headbands.

The two forces glared at each other, tension building.

Miss Hiratsuka was the one who would be giving the starting signal with the war horn in her hand. She looked excited as she raised it up. *Ahhh, yeah, she’d be a fan of this…*

She sucked in a big breath as she readied the horn.

A loud *PWOOOOO!* rang out, and then both forces charged forward simultaneously.

“And now the Chibattle begins!”

While listening to Ooka’s commentary, I followed the movements of the forces with my eyes.

The captains of the white team were gunning for a quick and decisive victory, taking action immediately. Each of them selected opponents to match up against.

The first to attack was Kawasaki. She charged straight in, ignoring the movements of her teammates fanning out around her. Ahead of her was Meguri.

Indeed, Meguri may have been the most obvious target of the red team captains. With her gentle persona, it was hard to imagine her taking more than one hit. But that was a false sense of security.

No, you're mistaken!

When Meguri discovered Kawasaki, she momentarily panicked, but she quickly pulled herself together and called out to the other players. "Guys! Let's do this!"

The nearby horses of her team all rushed over. They blocked Kawasaki's path, becoming a wall that prevented her from reaching Meguri.

This was a technique accomplished by Meguri's unique character. With these firm defenses stonewalling her, Kawasaki was at a loss for how to attack.

"…Tsk." With a click of her tongue, she temporarily withdrew, perhaps to reformulate her approach.

So Meguri's weathered the storm for the moment…, I thought, but my relief was only momentary. I heard a strange cry and a wail coming from the central area.

"Eh-heh-heh-heh, Yuuuuiiii…"

The source of the strange cry was Ebina. She was riding on a "horse" put together by some relatively strong girls from their team, stirring up a cloud of dust as she charged.

"Ahhh, here she comes!"

The source of the wail was Yuigahama. Ebina had found her prey and was reveling in the thrill of the hunt, dogging her all over the field. Yuigahama was half in tears as she fled.

The Yuigahama unit wove around the other horses and riders, desperately turning this way and that, and every time, Ebina spurred her "horse" to charge after. Both units raced all over the battlefield, leaving chaos in their wake.

Those two look like they're in a stalemate… Well, so long as Yuigahama was still scampering around, there should be nothing to worry about there.

It was a good show and easy to follow—the captains were taking the lead to take down individual opponents, while the audience yelled to cheer them on.

"The narrow battle between captains continues. Whoa, captain versus captain again!"

As everyone cheered wildly, the attention of the crowds followed Ooka's commentary and turned to the remaining captains. The Yukinoshita unit was moving with extra precision.

She deftly dashed past the horse players who stood in her way, aiming for her opponents' headbands to snatch them away. Ahead

in her path awaited Miura.

Keeping Yukinoshita in her sights, Miura blasted through enemy unit after enemy unit, laying them down like toddlers ready for a nap.

Finally, both units faced off.

Miura smirked at Yukinoshita, and Yukinoshita coolly stared at Miura.

Attention gathered on the standoff between this pair with such contrastive fighting styles.

As if it had been planned, the both of them charged at the exact same moment. Miura's horse thundered across the ground, while Yukinoshita was soundless, like quietly falling snow.

And then they collided.

The moment the two of them crossed, Miura's body floated slightly upward.

From a distance, it would look like they'd just passed by each other. But I'd seen those movements before. That was Yukinoshita's special ability to throw someone while hardly touching them.

"A-an air throw… What the heck, is she Master Asia? Is she going to die at dawn?"

While I was busy being shocked, the Miura horse and rider lost its balance, weakly flopping over. The fall of Miura seemed to break the opposition, and the white team descended into chaos.

Victory was ours.

The war horn rang out loud.

"A brilliant show of skill! Victory for the red team!"

The commentators praised the red team for their win. The audience offered a round of heartening applause to both sides.

They actually won the damn thing…

Sort of shocked and sort of not, I clapped as well.

During the applause, the girls came back. Yukinoshita's shoulders were heaving with exhaustion, and Yuigahama's legs were wobbly after eluding Ebina for so long.

"Good game." I gave them a casual wave, and the both of them high-fived me.

"I leave the rest to you."

"Counting on you, Hikki."

"Okay, but…"

Watching the two of them head off to the committee tent, I quietly looked at my own hand.

X X X

In the brief break before the pole pull-down game was to begin, I returned to the first aid tent for a moment. Well, this was basically just insurance. When I found what I was searching for, I immediately stuffed it into my pocket.

The commentator seats had been swapped again, and I heard Miura making the announcement. *“The next event is the boys’ pole pull-down.”*

Right, then I’ve got to head to the entrance gate, too.

The game that was about to happen, the pole pull-down, had very simple rules. Both teams would raise poles, and the team to bring down their opponents’ pole won. It was kind of anticlimactic for Ebina to come up with something so surprisingly normal.

Or so I thought, but then a creepy laugh sounded out low and quiet from the speakers. *“Gur-hurr-hurr-hurr. B-boys locked in a grapple to pull down a pole… H-how dirty…”*

The sound of a firm smack came after that as Miura gave Ebina a whack on the head and created a burst of feedback.

Ebina is so weird…

I didn’t really care about the noise of the broadcast behind me as I lined up with everyone else waiting. Or I tried to. But there was a bit of a crowd ahead, and I couldn’t quite make my way forward. *Geez, outta the way*, I mentally complained, and I slithered through them like an eel.

“Oh-ho, is that not Hachiman?!”

On the way, I ran into Zaimokuza.

“Why are there so many people crowded around here?” I asked. If he’d come earlier than I had, he might know something.

But Zaimokuza tilted his head. “Herm? Mayhap there is something ahead.”

“Uh-huh.” *Well, whatever. All these people are getting annoying, so let’s just get straight to the front*, I thought, but when I proceeded, I found the center of the crowd was empty like the void.

Except for one person.

Wondering what was up, I peered closer to see it was Totsuka, wearing a button-down *gakuran*-style uniform.

Why is he wearing that…? Thank all that’s holy, I thought as I approached, and Totsuka seemed to notice me, too.

“Hachiman!” Brightly beaming, he rushed up to me. With each stride, his slightly overlarge uniform fluttered.

“Totsuka, that outfit…”

He was so cute, I was suddenly possessed by a sense of duty to figure out just what was going on here. What the heck—whoever came up with this combination has got to be a genius, right? To make Totsuka, a boy, wear a *gakuran*? Just what kind of Egg of Columbus idea is that…? I don’t even know what’s right and what’s wrong anymore. It’s like causality has been reversed and I’m being guided by the Law of Cycles.

Despite my question, though, it seemed Totsuka didn’t really understand himself why he was in this getup. “U-um… I—I kinda ended up being the captain… So they told me to wear this… I-it’s not weird, is it?”

Totsuka grasped the overlong sleeves in his fingers anxiously, shrinking away from people’s gazes a bit. The *gakuran* was baggy and looked too big for thin little Totsuka; maybe that was a last-minute idea. But that was fine.

“It looks great. It’s not weird at all.”

That’s right, it’s not weird—this is love…

“Herm, this is the first I’ve ever witnessed the moment someone falls in love…,” Zaimokuza said with some dismay, but Totsuka was so cute, I couldn’t really hear him.

X X X

Once both the red and white teams were done lining up, we went into the field. Finally, the pole pull-down would begin.

"First, to introduce both the captains: On the white team is the soccer club captain, Hayato Hayama. On the red team is the tennis club captain, Saika Totsuka." Ebina made her introductory announcement, and the crowd's attention turned to our leaders.

Totsuka was quite flustered when his name came over the PA. As for Hayama, he casually raised a hand to respond to the cheers, looking calm.

His serenity must also have infected those around him. Morale on the white team side was high, with Hayama and his friends as their main pillar. Their little circle with Hayama in the middle felt very *teen*.

On the other hand, the red team boys were clearly lacking that enthusiasm. The heavy, dreary atmosphere around us made us look weak.

The only exception was Zaimokuza, beside me, who'd been mumbling to himself for a while now about his delusions. These M-2 syndrome types really like battles and fights like this, and he was throwing out useless factoids about wedges and Vs and the six and three strategies.

I doubt we're gonna win at this rate… Even before it had begun, I could see the ending. I sighed.

Well, the odds weren't entirely zero. Staring at my hands, I gathered my thoughts. I would be able to alter the situation slightly, depending on how I drew the cards at my disposal.

"Zaimokuza, I've got a secret plan," I said.

He reacted with a twitch. "A secret plan…? A general must have a tactician. Herm, tell me."

Good, good, he's on board. I knew it—just call it a secret plan*, and he's hooked.* I didn't like being treated like his underling, but, well, I'd forgive him this once. Since I was about to bequeath to him a horrible experience.

I whispered quietly into his ear, and Zaimokuza was startled.

"…Huh? You want me to do that?" He broke character for a second.

But I couldn't have him acting natural now. "No one else can.

In *Three Kingdoms* terms, you're Guan Yu. Totsuka is Liu Bei. Meaning that at a time like this, you're the only one to get everyone going and lead the army."

When I brought up the well-beloved *Three Kingdoms* stuff, Zaimokuza groaned. "Nghhh." Then he slapped his knee. "Aye, understood. Leave it to me."

Good, Zaimokuza's M-2 switch was flipped. Now he would fear nothing. These M-2 types with the delusions about having special powers can display truly impressive mental fortitude at times. In order to even qualify as an M-2, you need to be so deeply self-absorbed that you are occasionally rendered completely immune to common sense, thus allowing you to share your fantasies aloud or wear a trench coat in the middle of summer.

Zaimokuza strode up to the front of the red team line. He dramatically cleared his throat and then cried aloud, "Your attention, men! Our Supreme Commander has arrived!"

Totsuka was staring dazedly at Zaimokuza like, *Huh? Where'd this come from?* But when he realized he was the subject of this conversation, he hurriedly stepped forward. "Ah, um, I'm Saika Totsuka, captain of the red team… L-let's do our best, guys." Trying to encourage himself as well, he clenched a fist in front of his chest. He seemed a little lacking in confidence, but his earnestness did get across.

I want to protect that smile.

Upon hearing his greeting, Zaimokuza took another step forward. "Our sole foe is Hayato Hayama! Treat the rank-and-file only as checkpoints to be passed! Listen, now is the time for us to realize our dearest ambitions! Will we allow that revolting, stupid stud to steal away even our victory?! I say, nay!! I really wanna win! I don't want to feel any more pathetic than I already do! I don't want to move aside every time he walks through the hallway! I don't want to have to smile awkwardly every time he talks! I don't want to suddenly fall silent every time he passes close by! Do you concur?!"

Zaimokuza was getting choked up during his tirade. He seemed to be getting too into the act and veering into genuine tragedy.

His super-sad-sack performance created a mysterious energy that washed over the boys of the red team. The white team was also watching from a distance like, *What the heck?* He was the star of the show now.

“Y-yeah…,” someone stammered in agreement.

“Then what will we do? Victory is our only option! Now is the time of our awakening! Stand, men of Chiba!”

“Yeah!”

Zaimokuza’s ridiculously heated speech was inspiring us. The best part was Totsuka’s address, though. *I see everyone’s determined to win this for Totsuka’s sake, huh? Right?*

As I observed how the red team was doing, Zaimokuza came up to me, looking satisfied with himself. “Hmph. How do you like that?”

“Yeah, it was good. Attention-grabbing and super weird. Keep doing it.”

“W-weird?” Zaimokuza was a little stricken.

Uh, anyone would think that was weird… But that was what had given it an irresistible force, making everyone want to listen. ’Cause when people aren’t motivated, the first thing you have to get from them is their interest, or they won’t listen to what you have to say.

On that point, Zaimokuza had done well. I’m fairly sure that around the time he got home, he would remember this and wonder, *Why did I say something like that…?* and roll around in mortified agony. It’s easy to get carried away in the moment, but it can also create emotional scars that will never disappear your whole life long.

Either way, thanks to Zaimokuza’s honorable sacrifice and Totsuka’s smile, the preparations had been laid.

I turned my gaze over to our goal, the white team’s pole. Underneath it was the white team captain, Hayato Hayama. He was pretty far away, but he’d noticed me, too. From a distance, it looked as if he was grinning back at me.

All right, then—let’s do this. Head-on, fair and square, sneakily and viciously like cowards.

X X X

The starting gun sounded, and the boys from both teams leaped out.

The cheers swelled, and the men raised their battle cries. The excitement built all the more.

Of everyone, Ebina’s excitement as commentator was the

wildest.

“And now it’s begun, the boys’ boy pole pull-down by the boys’ boys! Thrusting in, penetrating the defense! The two forces mingle! First, a preemptive attack from the white team!”

Considering all the stupid stuff she was saying, I could also hear something resembling actual commentary, unfortunately.

Being that morale with the white team was high and Hayama was the captain, unsurprisingly, their team was proficient. They focused their forces, aiming to break through a single point.

Of course, the red team boys, who had no coordination or anything, were quickly scattered, and the enemy was closing in on our pole.

Totsuka and a few boys were underneath the red team’s pole as defense. The white team boys were gathering there.

“A-ack!” In the fierce struggle, Totsuka reflexively ducked and dodged (how cute). If they managed to break past him, too, then there would be no one to protect the pole anymore. Right then, some nearby red team boys came in to support him.

One of those drove off the white team boy facing Totsuka. But the defensive formation had been hit pretty hard.

Seeing what had happened, Totsuka ran up in a panic.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay! I can take a hit for you, Captain!”

Totsuka smiled bashfully. “Thanks…”

“…Urk.” The red team defender had looked straight at Totsuka’s smile, and he collapsed on the spot with a strangely serene dying expression.

“The boys of the red team are all idiots, huh…?” I’d been watching the whole thing from the edge of the field, and it seemed the pole would be okay for the moment if I left this to Totsuka and the other defenders. Dragging my legs unenthusiastically yet steadily, I took one step forward, then another.

As I was coming up to center field, I heard a great yell from amid the enemy forces.

“Hebwaaaagh!”

Looking over, I saw Zaimokuza staggering forward in a dramatic death scene, covered in mud. Everyone watched this bizarre behavior from a distance without intervening.

“G-gwaaagh! Th-though Yoshiteru may perish, victory never dies! I have no regrets in life…! W-woe, gerf!”

His very conspicuous death was weirding out both enemy and ally, keeping anyone from approaching.

Clouds of sand billowed up around him. His hair disheveled, coughing and hacking, he continued to stagger along.

Obnoxious, as usual… But now that he had their attention, I could do my job.

Zaimokuza's dying wails continued to ring out in the distance. The red team's position was still being attacked, too. Neither enemy nor ally was paying any attention to me.

Best of all, I have a reputation for going unnoticed.

This is the skill I've cultivated through many years of lonerdom—Stealth Hikki!

I pulled out the bandage I'd stuffed into my pocket and wrapped it around my head. Now at a glance, I'd look like I was on the white team. Slipping in among the other members of the white team, I broke into the enemy formation—or rather, I ignored them.

Zaimokuza was still wailing like a maniac, and everyone else was reacting to him. If he could just keep drawing them over there…

The white team pole was right ahead. Now all I had to do was amble up to it and knock it down.

Guess I might as well check what kind of defenses they've got, I thought, looking up, and that was when a voice suddenly addressed me.

"Hey, I thought you'd come."

"Hayama…"

Hayato Hayama gave me a pleasant smile. I reflexively replied with a smarmy one.

Without even realizing it, I'd been surrounded by Hayama's clique.

With a couple of jabs at his own headband, he asked me, "That bandage… Did you hurt your head?"

"Oh, there's always been something kinda wrong with my head…"

He sounded like he was scolding a child for their mischief; it made even me feel awkward. I pulled off the bandage. Hayama glanced over toward Zaimokuza. He was still staggering around, making noises like *gouf!* and *agg!* and *bigzam!*

"Zaimokuza, was his name? It was a good tactic to make him the decoy… But…" Hayama's smile vanished then. He pierced me

with a serious glare. “There’s no way I’d take my eye off you.”

“…I’m flattered, but I’m not worth it. I’m not that important here.”

But even as I said that, I could feel the pressure around me on my skin. The other boys of the white team were inching toward me.

Hayama noticed me glancing furtively for an escape route and threw down the gauntlet. “The diversion was a good play, but we have teamwork to counter it. Don’t hold it against me.”

“You’re just ganging up on me…”

“Don’t put it like that. We’re just taking advantage of our numerical superiority.” Hayama grinned brightly. What a guy, being able to smile at a time like this. I think he’s pretty twisted, too.

But now was not the time to be analyzing Hayama. I slowly raised my hand. He seemed confused by the gesture. “You surrender?”

An easy assumption to make, given the situation. But that wasn’t it. “No… Zaimokuza!”

I swung down my arm, aiming for the pole.

“Aye, sir!” When I called out to him, Zaimokuza, who’d been rolling around aimlessly nearby, leaped up off the ground and charged for the pole.

“If you’re going with numerical superiority, then we’re going with inertial superiority,” I said with a mean smile at the white forces. For an instant, they didn’t even realize what had happened.

Then Hayama suddenly clued in and swiftly gave instructions. “A decoy for the decoy?! Shoot! Go, go!”

Under his direction, Tobe, Yamato, and Ooka reacted swiftly, running to stop him.

“You ain’t gettin’ by!”

“Come on, if you can!”

“Let’s do this!”

The three of them built a tight huddle to block Zaimokuza’s path. But Zaimokuza never stopped or flinched—he just kept charging on in.

“I COMETH! MOOOVE!”

His rush added acceleration to his weight. It was powerful enough. Knocking aside the trio, Zaimokuza juggernauted straight toward the pole.

The pole rocked. The crowd buzzed, then gulped. The pole

rocked back the other way. Everyone widened not their mouths, but their eyes, watching the movements of the pole.

And then it swayed.

The moment the pole fell, cheers exploded. Among those wild cheers, Zaimokuza let out a roar of victory louder than any other.

X X X

It really felt like fall now, and the wind passing through the clubroom was cold. It made my warm MAX Coffee especially good.

Steam rose from the teacups atop the desk.

It felt like it had been a while since we'd last spent time in the clubroom like this. A few days had passed since the recent sports festival, and the Service Club had returned to regular operations. Yukinoshita and I would read our books, while Yuigahama would do whatever she does on her phone.

But even so, the sports festival had left some slight ripples behind.

Yukinoshita closed her book with a snap. "I can't believe we lost, after everything…"

"Yeah… I'm shocked we lost 'cause of foul play."

The two of them discussed the turn of events as they reached for their teacups. This topic was a little difficult for me to listen to.

"We would have won if a certain *someone* hadn't tried to pull something foolish with his headband…," Yukinoshita said with a glance over at me. She was evidently displeased with the result of the sports festival the other day. Unsurprising, knowing who she was.

"H-hey now, it's not all Hikki's fault." Picking up on the gathering storm, Yuigahama defended me.

But in Yukinon's eyes, anything less than a nonpareil performance was nonfeasance. Is that why Yuigahama calls her that?

"Though that is essentially what happened…," Yukinoshita said.

As the two of them said to the point about the sports festival, the red team lost. Worst of all, the reason was because of rule breaking in the final game, the pole pull-down.

When the results had been announced during the closing

ceremony, it had been a real mess.

The one in charge of announcing those results had been Sagami, the committee chair.

"Regarding the pole pull-down, it has been determined that both teams have engaged in dangerous behavior and broken the rules. The game has been invalidated, and both teams receive no points for it. We will be informing everyone of the details in due course."

After that brief statement, she'd said nothing more, and the white team had been given a tentative victory.

The practical issue here was that in a competition like the pole pull-down where a whole bunch of people were crowded together, you couldn't monitor each individual's moves. Some players would sneakily get up after being knocked down, and others might get kind of violent or replace their headbands.

Of course, there were immediate protests. Some had also questioned specifically what rules had been broken and who had done it.

But it was difficult to explain in detail about the rule breaking that had gone on, since you wouldn't be able to say for sure unless you knew everything that everyone had done during the match. This was almost like demanding proof of the unprovable, like ghosts or cryptids or whatever. Fundamentally, the burden of proof was on the committee, being that they were in charge of supervision, but so long as the committee revealed nothing, nobody would know the truth.

Thanks to this, my breaking of the rules had not been made public. Well, there was also no proof that anyone else hadn't broken the rules.

"Well, our venerable chair made that decision, so it's fine. Whatever," I said.

Yukinoshita gave me a cold look. "I suspect you lack remorse…," she said.

I had no reply for her. For some reason, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were both fully aware that I had broken the rules, and they understood that the aforementioned announcement from Sagami was about me.

Of course, I'd been completely exposed, so I couldn't bring myself to play dumb. "Well, sorry… I thought nobody was looking…," I apologized without much enthusiasm.

"Bad!" Yuigahama stuck a finger up like she was giving me a

little lecture. “I mean, people do watch you quite a bit, you know?”

“Yes, when you took out that bandage, I wondered just what you were going to do.” Yukinoshita sighed in exasperation.

I see—so if she was watching then, she definitely noticed me breaking the rules…

“Oh, you were watching him, too, Yukinon?” Yuigahama said with surprise, turning toward Yukinoshita. It seemed she had also witnessed my misdemeanor.

Yukinoshita blinked a few times. “…I just happened to be,” she replied quietly, and then she returned her interest to her book.

“Don’t…”

Well, you know, your eyes tend go to people you know when you’re watching team sports. I’d been staring at them a lot during the Chibattle myself, so my grumbling quieted a bit.

Yuigahama picked up on the darkening atmosphere and changed the subject with extra cheer. “W-well, you know! Meguri was glad!”

That had been the one saving grace.

Though the red team had lost, it seemed Meguri had enjoyed making the memory. I’d wanted us to win for her, if we could, but, well, things weren’t going to work out that easily.

Yukinoshita smiled softly at Yuigahama’s remark. “She was. Plus, Sagami must have had her reasons to make an announcement like that.”

“I dunno about that.”

I don’t really believe people can grow or change. At the end of the day, our core is what it is.

But I think we can learn how to keep up appearances, to put on an act, or how to distance ourselves. We can put a lid on our emotions so we don’t end up hating each other, and we can learn to pretend we don’t see things. Is it right? I don’t know.

“But losing a school sports festival is surprisingly frustrating. This was the first I’ve ever experienced that,” Yukinoshita said. It seemed the memory was reawakening her spirit of competition.

“Yeah, let’s win next year!” Yuigahama said, full of spirit.

Yukinoshita gave her a faint smile. “…Yes, next year for sure.”

“It won’t necessarily be the same teams next year.”

“Why do you always have to say stuff like that?” Yuigahama grumbled.

With a bit more cool, Yukinoshita grinned. “That’s right. It’ll be

more fun with Hikigaya as the enemy."

"You're suddenly really into this idea!"

Watching their exchange, I found myself smiling a bit. This was a trivial, mundane exchange, but right after a big event like the sports festival, it had been sorely missed. I'd become used to this daily routine before I even noticed. One day, I'll be used to my life without it, too.

Or maybe the real mundane routine is the experience of gaining something and then losing it, itself. I wanted to swallow those emotions, though, so I tossed back my MAX Coffee all at once to help them go down sweeter.

Watching the two girls messing around together from the corner of my eye, I quietly got to my feet.

"I'm gonna go buy myself another coffee." Without really waiting for a response, I left the clubroom.

X X X

The fall wind was blowing through the special-use building.

A window had been left open, and I could hear shouts from the sports clubs. Now that the sports festival was over, they'd gone back to their usual routine.

Haruka and Yukko would also be among them. The whole incident was still unsettled, as was their relationship with Sagami. Eventually, everyone would forget about the process and results of the sports festival, and it would all be weathered away.

I walked slowly through the emptied-out school building and down the stairs.

Right when I was about to turn into the hallway, I almost bumped into someone.

I lifted my head, thinking, *Who is it? Watch out!* and there was Minami Sagami.

She was holding a stack of papers, and I saw the words *Sports Festival* dancing across one of them. It looked like she still had some post-event committee matters to deal with.

"…"

"…"

We both kept our eyes pointed away from one another as we

fell silent.

But then suddenly, Sagami opened her mouth. “Hey, could you move?” she asked, but she didn’t really look at me. As usual, we were two parallel lines.

Without a word, I ceded the way to her.

All I heard after that was the sound of her receding footsteps.

But still, you know. I’d call that major progress.

I doubted it’d be immediately, but I figured Sagami and I would be able to successfully maintain the relationship of strangers from now on.

Listening to her footsteps moving farther away, I started off, too.

And so another festival was done, and what’s done is done.

Sometimes there are no take-backs. But whether you’re crying or laughing, life goes on, and your time in high school will come to an end.

That’s why their festival won’t end.

Middleword

Good evening, this is Wataru Watari.

Now then, this part that would have been the afterword is now the middleword because another section has been added after this, and so this ramble will only be a brief interlude, but I hope you will stick with me for a bit.

Is the line *Before you know it, he's always working…* about Hachiman, or me? I don't even know anymore! And on that note, the season has finally turned to summer. It's become quite hot, but how are you all doing? I've been dying—whoops, I mean, just working (eyes rolling backward).

Right, so then this manuscript is *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected* 6.25, 6.5, and 6.75 reorganized and reedited, improved and revised into a director's cut, and put together again into one book. As for the chronological order in the series, this story is positioned between the cultural festival in Volume 6 and the field trip in Volume 7.

The main actor in this volume is almost certainly unquestionably *her*, and in fact, I do think arbitrarily myself that there may be no character as human as she is. But have you enjoyed her activities? (*Activities*? Is that the word?)

As a light-novel author writes, they're always confronting characters. With a character like her in particular, you tend to think, *Yeah, yeah, people like that exist…*, but you also think, *Yeah, that sort of thing really does happen, I'm sorry…* Writing her character was an interesting experience. But if you asked me if this was grounded and realistic, I'd say no, not quite. Maybe I'll call it the difference between realism and reality—personally, she was a character who inspired those thoughts in me. Yes, realism and reality are different, just as different as pants and panties.

But anyway, I'm glad as a writer to have the opportunity to write what happened after those events, and I hope that one day I can write something like this again.

And so this has been *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I*

Expected, Volume 6.5.

Following this, under the title “bonus track,” I deliver a novelization of the *My Youth Romantic Comedy* drama CD *When the Flame of That Christmas Candle Wavers*… Those who have the special edition, please do enjoy it together with the drama CD!

Well then, let’s meet again in the afterword!

Wataru Watari

BT

Bonus track!

“When the Flame of That Christmas Candle Wavers…”

This bonus track is a novelization of the script from the drama CD that was attached to the special edition of *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected*, Volume 6.5. The CD script is an episode set after the end of Volume 9. We recommend reading and listening to it after having read the ninth volume of the light novels. Also, as this is a rewrite, please be aware that some lines will differ slightly from the audio CD.

Christmas.

A fearsome event that sweeps up the whole city—couples mingling and young people hooting “Wei, wei!” as they parade down the street. To those cast out from society, it’s the most odious thing.

But hold on—wait a second.

Those of you who curse Christmas: Set your sights higher.

Don’t waste your time making posts like *Retweet to cancel Christmas*. That’s what losers do.

Our true enemy is not Christmas, but the people incessantly making noise all year round. Whether Christmas is there or not, the sight of the city in excitement and gleeful couples is irritating, and stupid kids cheering are actually more of a hassle in spring.

Those of you who reject Christmas: Set your sights higher.

Don’t make petty excuses like *I’m a Buddhist, though (lol)*. That’s what the weak do.

Appealing to names like gods or Buddhas in the attempt to reject Christmas is the utmost arrogance. A true loner will be independent from not only other people, but divine powers, too.

Instead of making reference to a god you don’t know exists, you should firmly reject Christmas by means of your own spirituality.

Don’t pray to god—your heart shall be crushed. Don’t beg for it—earn it. Do it, and you’ll be rewarded.

There is no god for cattle, including the cattle owned by corporations.

Whether you're alone or with another, Christmas is coming again this year.

In a word, Christmas is…

It's…uhhh…it's like, you know. You better watch out, and all that jazz… I've never actually enjoyed Christmas before, so I don't know what to do. No, seriously, I have no idea…?

X X X

Now that winter break had begun, the school building was deserted.

A glimpse out the windows would show the sun was already setting. You could just barely hear the sports clubs practicing outside.

The field was only faintly lit by the lights through the windows of the school building and the gym, and the streetlamps. There was no sign of people in the courtyard and only a few lights were on, so it was desolate and cold. A chilly wind blew in from the sea, rattling the windows.

But the heat was on low, so maybe that was why this room was filled with warmth.

"Ahhh… This tea is nice." Yuigahama, sitting at a diagonal from me, sighed with relief as she placed her mug on the desk.

Yukinoshita and I both casually nodded back at her and picked up our teas again. Yes, yes, you have to value your teatime, you know?

"The Christmas event went well, huh?" Yuigahama said in a mellow, calm manner. She was basking in the afterglow of a job well done.

Yukinoshita chuckled a little. "Yes. I was worried, but I suppose the burden is finally off our shoulders."

"Yeah, feels like it's been a long time since we last took it easy…," I said. For a while now, every day had been a flurry of panic from something or other hounding us.

The cultural festival, the sports festival, the school field trip, the student council election, and then the joint Christmas event. The busy season of each event had come and gone, come and gone,

come and gone…… Isn't that like how your life flashes before your eyes? Am I gonna die?

While sort of half reflecting on the past, I drank my remaining tea. Even once its contents were gone, the cup remained a little warm.

I let out a short sigh that was quickly joined by two others.

Yukinoshita happened to lift her head then, glancing over at Yuigahama's mug. "Yuigahama, would you like some more tea?"

"Oh, thanks," Yuigahama said, and she held her cup out gladly.

"Hikigaya, give me your cup."

"Uh-huh." I held mine out as well without particularly questioning it, but after a second, I got the feeling she'd posed the offer differently to Yuigahama. "…Uh, aren't you treating us kind of different? Can you at least try to be subtle?" I said.

But Yukinoshita was sliding her gaze over to the box on the desk, preparing the tea as she said, "There are also some extra cookies, so could you dispose of them?"

"You're not listening to me… But I won't say no to cookies. Since we won't be coming to school for a while, I wouldn't want to leave them here."

While I was pawing around inside the box that apparently had cookies in it or something, Yuigahama popped up beside me to look. "I'm taking two!"

"Sure, here."

"Yay! Yukinon's cookies are great, huh?"

Yukinoshita gave her a little smile, and Yuigahama was about to gladly bite into a cookie when she suddenly seemed to realize something and shoved her chair back, getting to her feet. "…Wait, this isn't right!" Her voice rang loud in the quiet clubroom.

"Whoa, why are we jumping up now?" I asked.

"You'll spill the tea."

But both Yukinoshita and I were used to Yuigahama's boisterous style, so we reacted with absolute calm. Yukinoshita was acting rather mom-like.

Yuigahama seemed somewhat dissatisfied by our reactions, eyes flaring wide as she kept going. "You guys are too chill right now! I was talking about what we'd do later today!"

Yukinoshita tilted her head as if she'd only just remembered this. "Now that you mention it, you're right…"

"Yeah, yeah! So what do we do about Christmas today? We've

made the plans, so let's go all out!" Yuigahama had finally gotten the reaction she wanted; she nodded aggressively and flung out her arms wide.

But these topics were problematic for me. I found myself scratching my head. "What do we do? I dunno… I was just planning to spend it at home, like normal."

"Huh? Is that normal? Isn't Christmas more like, you know, everyone going all out like *bang, bang, kapow*?!"

"Like…what? I don't get it…"

I don't get the *bang, bang, kapow* part in particular. What even.

Yukinoshita put her hand to her chin and thought. "I don't think it's strange to spend it at home, though. I've heard that in the West, it's typical to spend it with your family."

"But this is Japan…," Yuigahama said in a sulky tone, and I immediately moved to stop her protests.

"Hold on. Calm down, Yuigahama. This comes from the birthplace of Christmas, Lady Europe. In this case, the correct choice is to follow her lead and spend the day at home. That's *the world standard*, what *globalized* Christmas is all about," I said, attacking with sound reasoning and a dash of English, too, for added legitimacy.

But Yuigahama was cold to the idea. She waved her hand in front of her face in a vigorous negative. "Naw, naw, I don't really know about *the World* or *Stands* or whatever; that's kinda got nothing to do with it, yeah? Everyone just has fun with it, even if they don't know about the details."

Yukinoshita *hmm*'d as she considered, then said, "…It's true that our way of celebrating has been localized into a unique Japanese cultural custom." It was rather unusual for Yukinoshita to be persuaded like that. But that wasn't the real shock.

"Yuigahama, making a decent argument…?" I uttered.

"Ha." With a smug chuckle, Yuigahama proudly puffed out her chest.

"All right, I get it. Let's assume you're right. So how do we correctly enjoy Japanese Christmas?" I asked her.

Yuigahama tilted her head. "Huh? Um, like I said, normally…"

"To me, normal is spending it at home. I've never spent Christmas with anyone but my family. What do you do, specifically? Should I be shouting 'Wei'? This isn't April at the train station by the university…," I said.

Yukinoshita nodded emphatically. “Indeed, the station by the university gets rather grating around April.”

“’Cause they’re literally yelling ‘Wei, wei!’… And around town on Christmas, they’re totally going ‘Wei, wei, rah, rah, woof, woof.’ Just thinking about people like that, I’m like…” Some people are in party mode anywhere and anytime, not just around the holiday season. The thought of them alone drained me of joy and replaced it with despair.

But Yuigahama waved her hand to say *No way*. “Naw, they don’t say ‘wei’ or ‘woof.’”

“Yeah, they do. Like Tobe,” I instantly shot back.

Yuigahama didn’t know what to say to that. “Ohhh, Tobecchi… But that’s Tobecchi, so it’s kinda like, nothing you can do about him…”

You’re smiling to smooth this one over, but you’re saying some mean things here.

Hearing this, Yukinoshita gave a puzzled look as she added to the cruelty. “I don’t care about Tobe, but, um, what do you mean by ‘wei’ and ‘woof’?” Yukinoshita truly didn’t care about Tobe; she was more interested in the matter of wei and woof.

Yuigahama tilted her head with a blank look. “I dunno? I wonder… It’s probably…English?”

I couldn’t help but smile at her innocence. With a helpless smile, I spoke to her as I would to a small child. “That’s right—you assume every word you don’t know is English, huh? Oh well.”

“Hey! Acting so kind about it just makes it worse!” Yuigahama huffed.

But you do remind me of a little kid. You have the same logic that assumes all foreigners are Americans. I can’t help it…

Meanwhile, Yukinoshita seemed to have taken Yuigahama’s statement seriously and was considering the matter. “Hmm, *wei* in English… So would that be *weito*, meaning, to wait…?”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure that isn’t it.”

In fact, I don’t think those guys know any English. And their Japanese is pretty dubious, too. But just because your language skills are weak, it doesn’t mean you’re bad at communication; actually, based on the fact that they can engage in conversation using only limited vocabulary like *Whoa*, and *Right?* and *Ah, man!* and *Like, really*, you could well call their communication abilities ridiculously high. It’s an ultra-high-context culture. “The culture’s

so different!" people sometimes say, and yeah, I can concur.

As I was pondering this, Yukinoshita's gaze swung over to me. "Hikigaya. *Wait. Stay. House.*"

"Is this dog training…?" *No way—is she going for the "woof" thing? Whoa, that's some high-level material.* "You don't have to tell me. I fully intend to return to my house."

I was about to obediently get up and leave, but Yuigahama yanked on my sleeve, forcing me to sit down. "Wait, wait! Wait right there! We haven't decided anything yet!"

"Decide what…? I mean, even if we were gonna spend Christmas together, what would we do?"

Though I reluctantly seated myself again, I didn't feel like this was going anywhere. As usual, I don't know what you're supposed to do when you "hang out." I'd really like them to put out some basic standards for that. Put it in the *Daijisen* dictionary. I think there are a lot of people who'd be able to do it properly if they just knew the protocol.

Well, of course there are no basic standards for these things, and everyone figures out their own social wisdom through experience or things they hear from people they know.

But our local incarnation of social wisdom, aka Yui Yuigahama, was also groaning to herself as she pondered this. "Just cut loose and have fun! …But Hikki doesn't like that… The Christmas lights are pretty…but then he'd say he'd just go see them alone… Hmm, hmm…"

My heart squeezed a little watching her. "Whoa, now you know what I'm gonna say before I even say it… You've grown, Yuigahama."

"More like you *haven't* grown, Hikigaya… You'll wind up going regardless, so why not accept the inevitable now? You never learn," Yukinoshita insisted, exasperated.

But I had my piece to say, too. "You're the one who doesn't learn. I'm never gonna listen to you if you keep talking to me like that…"

"Oh, don't underestimate me. I am learning." Yukinoshita's triumphant smile quickly waned. "…Yuigahama may not look it, but she can be quite persistent. Sometimes there's simply no point in refusing, you know."

"That's not learning—that's breaking…"

Eh, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama's slightly troubled relationship is its

own thing. It's progressing in its own way, so this is fine. Yes.

As I thought to myself, Yuigahama clapped her hands. "Oh, I know!"

"It looks like you have an idea. Would you like to tell us about it?" Yukinoshita diligently (completely broken) asked her.

Yuigahama stuck up a finger and waved it around, unsure. "Um…like, we all eat fried chicken together!"

"We could eat fried chicken anytime…," Yukinoshita retorted.

"By that logic, then a fried chicken restaurant is like Christmas every day, isn't it? Besides, we have chicken at home," I said.

Yukinoshita spun back to face me and smiled brightly. "You have *a* chicken at your home, too."

"C'mon, don't act like the chicken at my house is the kind you can find just anywhere. It has no backbone at all, so it's super-easy to eat. Plus, we have two of them, if you include my dad. Not every home has that luxury. They say not to count your chickens, after all."

"Before they're inevitably slaughtered for meat, you mean?"

"No talk about slaughtering! Nothing too graphic! You're gonna make me not want to eat chicken anymore!" Yuigahama cried out in grief.

Which would ruin Yuigahama's proposal. "If we're not gonna eat chicken, then we don't have to have a party. You've lost sight of your objective."

"Hikki, you schemer!" Yuigahama choked up like she didn't know what to say, but then she continued anyway. "O-okay, so maybe not chicken, but…let's have a cake, c'mon!"

"Cake, huh…?" I considered her suggestion. Frankly, in the Christmas event we'd just held, I'd made so much damn cake, so I wasn't sure about eating more on the same day. Besides, both chicken and cake were things we could eat anytime. If we wanted a Christmas-only thing, our options were a little weak.

While I was mulling this over, Yuigahama examined my face with unease. "Huh? You're not very enthusiastic about this… You don't like sweets, Hikki?" she asked.

I opened my mouth to respond, but someone else answered before me. "No, he actually loves them."

"Why'd you answer, Yukinoshita…? Was this introduction time? I mean, you're right, but…," I said.

Yukinoshita swished her hair off her shoulders and gave me a

cool look. “I didn’t even need to ask. You’d have to have quite the sweet tooth to drink that cloying coffee of yours.”

“Ah! You underestimate the Max can. Even if you’re not addicted to sugar, necessity will press you to drink it. A high percentage of Chiba farmers buy it by the box, you know. It replenishes all the nutrients lost by performing physical labor.”

Chiba farmers do indeed buy MAX Coffee by the box, and they also buy a big stock of four-panel gag magazines. I saw it myself when I went to a farmer’s house in elementary school as part of this extracurricular thing, so I know it’s true. Sweets really are the best when you’re tired. The people of Chiba drink so much MAX Coffee; we must be utterly exhausted.

As I considered offering Yukinoshita an eloquent lecture on the greatness of MAX Coffee’s sugar content, Yuigahama gave me a baffled look. “Huh… You don’t seem tired, though, Hikki… You’re always energy-saving…or, like, eco-friendly, or lazy? Or something like that, huh?”

“Listen, energy-saving and eco-friendly don’t mean lazy, okay?”

“So you *are* aware of your own indolence,” Yukinoshita cut in. “I would suppose that to someone who doesn’t know you, those rotten eyes of yours would appear tired. But you’re the picture of health… The eyes leave a powerful impression, especially yours.”

“Oh, no, this conversation is definitely exhausting. Can I go home now?”

“No, you can’t go!” Yuigahama insisted. “Agh, I don’t even care! Just pick something! Pick now!”

“Geez, pushy…”

This is the uncanny stubbornness that broke Yukinoshita, huh…? I was thinking rudely when Yuigahama’s head quietly dropped.

“If you really don’t want to, then…it’s fine…,” she said, looking up at me with a plea in her eyes.

“Urk, well, it’s not like I don’t *want* to or anything; it’s just that none of these ideas really feel like Christmas…”

When she looked at me like that, it inspired overwhelming guilt in me. But I couldn’t yield and allow our Christmas to become a hollow shell; it was the top of a slippery slope. I had to consider where my line in the sand was… Whoa, someone’s a pain in the ass, huh? I am, I know.

While I was struggling internally, Yukinoshita breathed a tiny sigh at us. “There’s really no need to give it this much thought. You

should just consider it a casual after-party, not Christmas. I'll be going with Yuigahama."

At that, Yuigahama grinned from ear to ear and leaped at Yukinoshita. "Thanks, Yukinon! That's right—maybe an after-party vibe would be nice. I'm sure Iroha-chan and the others'll be having one with the student council, and I wanna thank Sai-chan and Komachi-chan for helping us, too."

"Yes. A celebration to recognize everyone's efforts should be enough reason to satisfy him," Yukinoshita said as she peeled off Yuigahama.

I pondered her proposal a bit as well. "…Yeah, it's true; you have a point…but I can't today."

"Why not?" Leaning away from Yukinoshita, Yuigahama turned to me.

The talk of chicken and cake and stuff had reminded me that my mission that day was to pick up the party barrel I'd reserved and take it home. "Today I have to take some fried chicken back home to my family. And you know, I have to make dinner today, at least. I don't wanna make Komachi do it," I said.

Yuigahama looked surprised. "I didn't think you were such a family man…"

"And you rarely have plans."

Yukinoshita's observation brought a wry smile to my face. Indeed. Generally, I never have plans, but when it comes to promises to family—mainly to Komachi—I've never broken a single one.

"Sorry. I can't today."

"Oh…if you have plans, then I guess that's that, huh…?" Yuigahama said, and with a little nod as if I'd convinced her, she laughed. "Ah-ha-ha." Then she sighed quietly.

Though it had been a spur-of-the-moment suggestion, I'm sure Yuigahama was looking forward to some Christmas fun. She did have other friends; she would have plenty of people to hang out with, but I didn't like seeing her so upset because of someone like me.

Yukinoshita must have felt the same, as she gave Yuigahama an anxious look. Then her gaze slid over to me. "If you can't today… that means you wouldn't mind tomorrow?"

"…Well, I've got nothing on the docket, really," I said, scratching my head.

Realizing what that meant, Yuigahama looked between me and Yukinoshita and clapped her hands. “Huh, huh, ah, ahhh, ohhh! Okay, let’s do it tomorrow! We can all get ready together and go buy presents and stuff!” she said excitedly.

Peacefully watching her, Yukinoshita nodded. “Yes, I think that’s a good idea. I’m a little tired today, too…”

Yukinoshita had given me a hand here. Thanks to her, the conversation seemed mostly over, and I stood from my seat. Now I had to go get the fried chicken and take it back home…

“…So that’s that.” I put my hand on the clubroom door.

Oh yeah. Maybe I should go for it. After reconsidering, I turned back to the both of them.

“See you tomorrow,” I said.

Yukinoshita seemed a little surprised but immediately gave a small smile, and Yuigahama waved energetically at me.

“Yes, see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see you!”

With their voices at my back, I left the clubroom. I felt like it had been a long, long time since I’d said those inconsequential little words of farewell.

X X X

I picked up the KFC order and headed home.

“I’m baaack,” I called out and climbed the stairs. When I opened the living room door, Komachi was sprawled on the sofa. She stood up and pattered her way over.

“Welcome home, Bro!”

“Hey. Here’s the chicken.” I handed over the party barrel in my arms. Komachi accepted it with care, carrying it to the kitchen counter.

“Thanks! ♪ Mom’s coming back soon, too.”

“Huh. And Dad?”

I pulled off my coat and tossed it onto the sofa with a *fwish*, and Komachi picked it up. As she was sticking it on a coat hanger, she tilted her head. “I ’unno.”

That was kinda cold… Did Dad do something to make Komachi hate him again?

Poor, poor Dad. Not only does his daughter hate him, but he has to work on a day like this—the corporate slave is indeed a pitiful creature.

"Anyway, you don't have to be with Yukino and Yui today?" Komachi asked.

"Naw, 'cause I'm spending Christmas Eve with family."

She gave me a dubious look. "Hmm. You sound like a girl letting a guy down gently because she likes someone else."

"…Huh? Do girls turn down invitations like that? Aw man, I feel really bad for the guy who hears that and thinks, like, *She's such a nice girl, caring for her family…* Why'd you have to tell me that? I didn't need to know…"

Sheesh… Girls are scary… Now I'm gonna suspect that just about everything girls do has some other meaning. Like, a girl will give me a piece of candy and I'll be thinking she's so nice, when she actually meant something like *Everything you talk about is so boring. Shut up. Here, have this candy instead.* It's middle school all over again.

When I trembled at the terror of it, Komachi put her hands on her hips and puffed her chest out boldly. "For such a suspicious guy, Bro, you have some very idealistic tendencies. Komachi's simply shattering those dreams, slowly over time, for you. Think of it as love from your little sister, okay?"

"Oh. Well, thanks…" *I'd rather you didn't kill my fantasies, though…*

While I sank into despair, Komachi glanced over at the party barrel, then gave me a look of concern. "Bro, you really don't have to worry about us, though. You could have just gone off to have fun on Christmas Eve."

"That's not what this is about. We put off the after-party until tomorrow. We'll go to buy presents, and then we'll have a party or something."

"Really? Aw man, Komachi wants to go, too!" she said with sudden enthusiasm, which made me remember something.

"Oh, that reminds me, they also said to invite you, too, as thanks for helping out today, but… You have your entrance exams, huh?"

"Nawww, one day or two isn't gonna change my scores. I just have to do two days' worth on another day!"

"That's a death flag. Once you start saying *I'm still okay, I have a*

little more time, maybe I'll make it, that's when deadlines pass you by. Listen, Komachi. You can get an extension on deadlines, but you can't get an extension on the exam day."

"Normally, you can't get an extension on deadlines, either, Bro…"

Komachi's eyes were serious—pitying, actually. *Ha-ha-ha… That's right, you typically don't get an extension…* Memories of the impending doom of the joint Christmas event tortured me. Uggghhh, why do deadlines even exist…? So many people could be happy if they didn't… Just look at how many people suffer because of them; I mean, they must be evil. Breaking such a powerful threat is an act of justice, isn't it? Well, leaving that aside…

Right now, Komachi over deadlines. Deadlines, important. Little sister, more important!

"But I dunno if going out to have fun is a good idea right now…"

I worried to myself, *Oh dear, is this all right? Is this what's best for my little girl?*

But Komachi herself didn't seem too hung up about it—she was mostly indifferent. "I'm fine, I'm fine. Recently, I keep wondering, *How's my brother doing? Is he doing something stupid again?* If my worries are keeping me from concentrating, that's an even bigger problem!"

"Well, I can understand the feeling." Lately, I'd also been wondering, *How is Komachi doing right now? There aren't any weird guys hitting on her, right? Taishi Kawasaki isn't putting the moves on her at cram school, right? And if he is, I'm gonna kill that brat…* It wasn't always distracting, but it happened often enough.

Seeing that her efforts were working, Komachi went in for the finishing strike. "Also, in Komachi terms, being told to go study kills my motivation."

"Yeah. Yeahhh, seriously. For real, yeah. That's totally…yeah. I'd even say it's just…yeah." I jabbed a finger at Komachi. "People telling you to study or work actually kills your efficiency. It's weird." I sighed wearily.

Komachi grinned with understanding. "Right? Soooo…"

"…Well, as long as you don't stay out too late."

"Yes! I've got to think about what to buy for a present!" Komachi threw her hands up gleefully.

But it would be best to offer her a warning, just in case. I

wouldn't be able to live with myself if she failed her entrance exams because of this. "Don't forget to study hard, too. Oh yeah. Talking about presents reminded me."

I grabbed the bag I'd tossed down and took out the package from inside, and I plopped it on top of Komachi's head. "Here ya go. Merry Christmas."

With a curious look, Komachi brought her hand to the package on top of her head and examined it. Her lips gradually widened into a smile. "Is this…a present for Komachi? Thanks, Bro! Hey, can I open it?"

"Go ahead. But I didn't think too much about it; I just bought what Yukinoshita and Yuigahama recommended. If you're gonna thank anyone, thank them," I said.

That seemed to surprise her, and her hands paused on the wrappings. "…Huh? You chose it together?"

"…Well, it just worked out that way," I replied.

Komachi smirked wickedly. "Ohhh, I seeeee. Is that right? Togeeether, huh?"

"…Why are you being so obnoxious about this?" It was really irritating. I glared sharply at her, but as usual, she simply grinned as she watched me fondly.

"Oh, no, no. I'm just smiling because I'm so happy. Your report just now was the greatest Christmas present Komachi could have gotten."

"Oh, really? As long as you're happy, I guess," I replied.

Then Komachi stuck up a finger and loftily explained. "Oh, but you know, Bro. When you give a girl a present, you can't say you chose it together with another girl. That scores low in Komachi's books. But Komachi's your little sister, so it's totally okay. In fact, it makes me happy. You, Yukino, and Yui together look like the strongest."

"Yeah, yeah. I doubt I'll have many occasions to give anyone presents, but I'll remember that, just in case. All right then, let me get dinner going already."

"Ohhh! Oh yeah, and I have to ask Yui about tomorrow…"

Casually ignoring Komachi's advice, I headed for the kitchen.

Okay. First up was Christmas in the Hikigaya household. *I shall wield my skills freely…* But our dinner was still mostly store-bought sides and already-cooked chicken.

X X X

The night of Christmas Eve passed, and Christmas Day had arrived.

Komachi and I were headed to our meeting place at the shopping mall. Since it was Christmas, the streets along the way sparkled with lights and ornaments, and the other people out in the city seemed kind of giddy.

And who do you think was the most excited of them all? My own little sister, Komachi Hikigaya. She'd been humming cheerily this whole time.

"You're chipper first thing in the morning, huh?" I said to her.

Komachi was a few steps ahead and spun around to face me. "Well, it's Christmas, after all! And now we're about to go shopping with Yukino and Yui. And *then*, we're gonna have a party and trade presents. Why wouldn't I be excited?"

She already knew the whole agenda for the day, I guess. She was even more informed than I was.

"I see. Well, I can see girls enjoying a gift trade. When I hear *trade*, though, I just can't help remembering the holes in my Pokédex and the ones I couldn't evolve…"

As I was indulging in fond but painful memories, Komachi kindly encouraged me. "I'm sure it'll be better in the future, Bro… Look, they're remaking *Ruby* and *Sapphire*!"

"That's a weird reason… Also, I'm an *Origins* fan."

Well, putting Wonder Trade in it would solve all sorts of problems for me, though. But wait, you trade with me, Komachi…, I thought, looking over at her, when she clapped a hand on my shoulder and pointed to the mall entrance.

"Don't sweat the small stuff. Look, we're here, Bro. Oh, it looks like they're waiting for us already," she said.

When I glanced over at the entrance of the shopping mall, there was Yuigahama and Yukinoshita. Yuigahama was waving her arms wide, apparently having noticed us.

"Yahallo!"

"Yui, yahallo! And yahallo to you, too, Yukino!"

"Hello."

Komachi greeted Yuigahama and Yukinoshita, but I'd like them to stop doing that greeting in public… It's a little embarrassing. I furtively glanced at the crowds all around us.

“You’re early. Is this everyone? If this is it, then let’s get going,” I said.

Since it was Christmas, the place was pretty crowded. I really didn’t want to wade through these crowds. It would be best to get this over with quickly.

But Yuigahama put a hold on that. “Wait, wait. I invited Sai-chan, too.”

“Oh, you did? Then I’ll wait until Totsuka comes. My whole life, if I have to.”

“Um, sure, but I dunno how I feel about that…”

While Yuigahama was groaning with a *hmm*, Komachi said, “Yukino, Yui, thanks so much for that Christmas present.”

“It’s nothing. I’m just glad you like it.” With a broad smile on her face, Yukinoshita shook her head as if to say, *Don’t worry about it*, and Yuigahama also nodded enthusiastically.

“I mean, I dunno if you could expect my brother to pick something like that, so it’s a good thing he got you two to choose it!”

This time, I was the one nodding vigorously. I mean, it really was a good thing that the girls had chosen it for me. Actually, I think what it was didn’t matter; she was just pleased they were the ones to pick something for her.

Yuigahama returned the smile. “Oh yeah. We did give Hikki a bunch of advice, but he was the one to make the final decision.”

“That’s right. Even though he normally hardly thinks at all, he was dithering to the very last second…” Twirling her long hair around her finger, Yukinoshita stared at me.

Komachi’s mouth popped open in shock. “…Huh? He…did?”

“Uh, you didn’t have to tell her that…,” I groaned. “Seriously, don’t—don’t say that…”

Choosing a present nonchalantly and smoothly is cool, you know. Worrying over it like I actually care is too embarrassing. Komachi’s stare was getting uncomfortable, so I decided to smoothly avoid her gaze and the subject. “Hey, what do you mean, ‘hardly thinks at all’? Almost no one does as much as I do. Someone should make a bronze sculpture of me.”

Yukinoshita put her hand to her mouth and restrained a little smile as she said, “My, I’m sorry. It would have been correct to say you think of hardly anything worthwhile, wouldn’t it?”

“I’ll take it. You’re not wrong.”

“You will, huh…? Ah-ha-ha… Oh, but you know, Komachi-chan. Hikki actually does think stuff through… Komachi-chan?”

When Yuigahama addressed her, Komachi suddenly rebooted. “…Ah! Oh no! My brother almost tricked me with his *hinedere* skills yet again! A-anyway, thanks very much to the both of you. And…to you, too, Bro.”

What do you mean, ‘tricked’…? I’m always being tricked by Komachi’s cuteness. The both of us jerked our heads away from one another in embarrassment.

“Hnn. Well, it’s no big deal. Don’t worry about it,” I said.

“Uh-huh.”

Watching me and Komachi, Yuigahama giggled. Yukinoshita was also observing with a gentle smile, but then she seemed to suddenly realize something and opened her mouth. “More importantly, I’m sorry for inviting you when you’re so busy with studying for exams, Komachi. We wanted to invite you just in case, but was it really all right for you to come? If you feel we’re forcing you to come along…”

“Oh, no, it’s okay. I need breaks, too,” Komachi replied.

Yukinoshita flicked a glare over at me. “If you’re only ever taking breaks, then the knowledge will all slip away from you.”

“Urk, you hit where it hurts…” Indeed, people often use breaks and breathers as an excuse to slack off.

That must have been hard for Komachi to hear as well. “I guess Yukino is the tiger-mom type…,” she quietly muttered beside me. “The reliable older sister… I’d like to make her my sister (in-law) one day.” Her eyes sparkled.

“It’ll be okay, Yukinon. Komachi-chan’s got a good head on her shoulders, so you don’t have to worry.”

It’s true; she does. Komachi must have been glad for the vote of confidence, because I could hear her whispering next to me again. “Yui comes off like the steady, traditional wife and mom type. The supportive big sister… I’d like her as my sister (in-law) one day.” Another twinkle in her eyes.

“What do you keep mumbling about…?” I asked.

“Hmm? That’s a secret! ♪” With a wave of her index finger, Komachi winked at me.

…Damn it, she’s so cute it’s infuriating.

“Well, anyway, you don’t need to worry, right? And besides—*I* got accepted!” Yuigahama said with a light smack on her own

chest.

Yukinoshita pursed her lips awkwardly. “I can’t argue with that…”

“Please argue! Come support me with helpful remarks here!” Yuigahama wailed.

“So then, question: Tell me which prefecture ranks first in production volume of *satsuma* sweet potatoes. Note that ranked number two is Ibaraki,” Yukinoshita calmly retorted.

“H-huh?” Yuigahama was flustered by Yukinoshita’s sudden question.

But you don’t even have to think about a question like that… “Come on, that’s super-easy… You’re giving too many hints,” I complained.

Groaning, Yuigahama started to rack her brain. “It’s easy, and she’s given too many hints… Potatoes… Ibaraki… Ah! Chiba!”

“Incorrect. She said *satsuma*, didn’t she? So the correct answer is Kagoshima prefecture. By the way, Chiba is third.”

“Yukinon, trick questions are unfair!”

“That wasn’t a trick question, though. It was actually easy…” Yukinoshita sighed in exasperation, while Yuigahama grumpily moaned.

How would she get Chiba out of that hint? What, did she want to say that Chiba’s like a potato, and of the same type as Ibaraki? *Could you stop dissing Chiba?*

With a horrified expression, Komachi muttered, “…Yui, how did you pass?”

“Because miracles and magic really do exist,” I said. “Well, Komachi’ll probably do okay on her exams. Any sister of mine’s gotta be smart. She’s a little spacey, but she’s shrewd, I’d say.”

“Despite your obnoxious attempt to highlight your own intelligence, I do understand what you’re trying to say.” It seemed Yukinoshita had no objection to my opinion, and she also nodded.

Uh, obnoxious*, hey…*

But in Komachi terms, my evaluation was more questionable, and she scowled. “Hmm, but *shrewd* doesn’t really feel like a compliment…”

“Yeah, that’s true. It’s like another word for *sneaky*,” Yuigahama agreed.

Ohhh, I didn’t expect that to bother her. Well, Yuigahama did have a surprisingly shrewd side to her. Her deft management of her

social relationships might look that way to some. I could imagine people making a snide remark or two about it. Yes, the relationships of girls are scary.

Scratching my head, I took this into account. “Gotcha. I’ll think of another way to say it…like *sly*, or something?”

“That’s even worse!” Yuigahama cried.

Ignoring her, Yukinoshita put her hand to her chin, and after a *hmm*, she opened her mouth solemnly. “Perhaps…*devious*?”

“It sounds so cool when you say it, Yukinon!” I have no idea why Yuigahama was looking at Yukinoshita so admiringly.

In contrast to Yukinoshita, Komachi opened her mouth very adorably.

“Or *devilish*. ☆”

“You’re saying it yourself?!” Yuigahama was shocked.

Ahhh, that’s just how Komachi is, you know. Like, that’s part of what’s shrewd about her. To put *shrewd* another way…

“Or *Komachi’s cute*,” I said.

Yuigahama made a face. “There it is, his sister complex… It’s nice that you’re close, but sometimes you’re kind of an apple polisher…”

“She’s the apple of my eye, after all.”

“And you’re still doing it?!”

While Yuigahama was being weirded out, someone else beside her was having the same reaction.

“Ohhh, that was a little cringey even for Komachi, Bro. At home it’s fine, but in public, this stuff gets embarrassing.”

“So it’s fine at home, is it…?” Yukinoshita noted, looking half-exasperated and half-shocked. Yuigahama’s smile contained a similar emotion.

“Ah, ah-ha-ha-ha…” And then, realizing something, she raised her hand. “Oh, it looks like Sai-chan is here. Heeey, here, over here!”

I looked over and saw Totsuka running up to us from the distance.

“Hachimaaan!”

“Ohhh, Totsuka, you’re here!” When I took a step forward, as if to catch Totsuka in my arms as he came running, I could see something behind him like a boar rushing toward us with the force of crashing waves.

“Hachimaaan!”

“Ohhh, Zaimokuza, you’re here…”

While Zaimokuza was wheezing with a sound like *fushururu*, Yuigahama called out to Totsuka. “Sai-chan, yahallooo!”

“Yeah, yahallooo!”

What a lovely greeting. Greetings really are nice. Yahallo *is cute, huh?* As I was thinking that, Zaimokuza revived, shooting his hand up at me.

“Aye, Hachiman. Yahallo!”

This greeting is so embarrassing… But why’s he only saying hi to me?

“U-uh, yeah… So who invited Zaimokuza?” I quietly asked Yuigahama and Yukinoshita.

The both of them made doubtful looks.

“Huh? You didn’t invite him, Hikki?”

“I thought for sure you were in charge of him…”

“No, I didn’t invite him…”

But the good thing about Zaimokuza is that any question can be answered with “Because it’s Zaimokuza.” There’s also simply that I’m completely uninterested in his behavior. In short, *Well, who cares?* ☆

“…Well, whatever. I was planning to thank you eventually anyway.”

“Herm. If you’ve no wish for a bald head, then do not fret over the details. And why have we gathered here this day?” Zaimokuza inquired.

Komachi looked over at Yuigahama and Yukinoshita. “Um… We’re about to have a Christmas party, so first we’re going to go shopping for some presents to trade—right, guys?”

Yuigahama nodded in response. “Yeah. Well, everyone’s here, so let’s go.”

“Yes, let’s get this done quickly,” Yukinoshita said, and she headed into the shopping mall. We followed after her.

X X X

Presents—they’re a sort of test.

If you buy something unwise, you’re going to make people think, *Oh, so this is what he thinks of me… Huh…*

It would not be an overstatement to say you can measure just about everything about a person through their choice in presents: their insight, taste, financial means… Mm, maybe it is an overstatement. Probably… Hopefully. *Better brace myself just in case.*

The inside of the shopping mall was also overflowing with crowds. Christmas songs were playing nonstop, and the people walking around carried big bags. There were quite a few stores in here, and many of the stores were decorated with wreaths and tinsel.

"Huh. I haven't come to this mall since it was built, but there's a lot of stuff here." As I took in the sights with the curiosity of a first timer, Yukinoshita also checked our surroundings.

"This is quite large, isn't it…? And so crowded. I assume this is due to Christmas… Just walking around is making me tired…"

This was Yukinoshita: Not only does she lack endurance; she's also bad with crowds. Every word of hers was tinged with despair.

And then there was Yuigahama. "You're so right! It's so full of energy and fun! Oh, look, there's Santa!" The cheery atmosphere inside the mall had bolstered her cheer, and Yuigahama was gleefully pointing at a nearby man dressed up as Santa who was handing out balloons.

Then she tug-tugged at my sleeve. "Hey, hey, Hikki, how long did you believe in Santa?"

"I think I believed until just before I started elementary school."

"Huh, that's kinda surprising." Startled, Yuigahama's mouth hung open.

Uh, it's not really, though. I was once pure, in my childhood.

When I was thinking about making a counterargument, Komachi smoothly stepped up beside me. "My brother was supercute when he was little! If you see him in pictures and home videos and stuff… His eyes weren't rotten then."

"Oh wow, I wanna see!"

But Komachi didn't hear Yuigahama, I don't think; her eyes were distant and disappointed, even grieving for the halcyon days of yore. *I-I'm sorry your big bro wound up like this…*

A pitying smile came to Yukinoshita's lips as she watched the other two girls. "I wonder why he became what he is… The flow of time is cruel."

"Seriously. Definitely the flow of time," I said.

"Ahhh, you never change…" Yuigahama sighed in resignation.

Yeah, blame that on the flow of time, too. Don't blame me.

"Hikki's hopeless, but what about you, Yukinon? Did you believe in Santa?" Yuigahama asked.

Yukinoshita's gaze slid off into the distance, and she muttered, "In all my memories, my sister had already told me the truth…"

"Ahhh, she's one of those…," I said.

Poor Yukinon… Yuigahama and I both gave her sympathetic looks. But that's just how it goes with Haruno. Although the vibe would be way different if she had been glued to her big sister and said things like *You're always so smart!*

"Hachiman, I never believed in Santa Claus for a moment! In this world, there are no gods or Buddhas or Santas or girlfriends!" Zaimokuza clenched a fist and thrust it high.

"I understand the sentiment, but why are you just talking to me…? Let's say important things like that to everyone, okay?"

I can't deny that the existence of girlfriends is as indeterminate as that of gods, Buddhas, or Santa Claus. There was value in listening to Zaimokuza's opinion on that point.

Yuigahama laughed a little shyly, maybe embarrassed to be among so many longtime nonbelievers. "Ah-ha-haaa… Wow, so you guys all realized pretty young, huh? I believed in Santa until my third year of elementary school, you know."

Then Komachi laughed in just the same way. "Ah-ha-ha, aw, Yui!"

"Ah-ha-ha, right. I was a bit of an idiot when I was little, I guess…"

Uh, that wasn't just when you were little. You're still an idiot…, I was about to say.

But before I could, I saw a *flash* ☆ in Komachi's eyes, and she gave an irresistible smile. "No, no, Santa really does exist. And that's worth a lot of Komachi points!"

"There it is! The bad smile!"

Even when Yuigahama pointed it out, the glint in Komachi's eyes remained.

"Well, she's always like that…," I said. "And we should stop talking about this. Some of us here might still believe in Santa…like Totsuka."

"Ah!" cried Yuigahama. "Sai-chan just might…"

When we glanced over toward Totsuka, he was hastily waving his hands back and forth. "O-oh, no, of course I don't believe

anymore. But…I do think it'd be nice if he were real."

Komachi made the mistake of looking right at Totsuka as he gave his shy little *eh-heh-heh* laugh, and she jerked back. "Whoa! Totsuka is so radiant!"

"I-I'M *HIKARI NI NARE*-ING!"

Zaimokuza must have caught a glimpse of it, too, as even he was suffering. Sheesh, amateurs… Of course he's gonna be blindingly adorable, come on.

"No, nobody's becoming the light…," I grumbled. "I can't become the light, so I'm gonna become Totsuka's Santa."

"What are you even talking about…?" With an exasperated expression, Yukinoshita swept her hair back.

Ah! Shoot! I was just trying to stay calm, but I'd accidentally become the light myself…

"Anyhow, this place is so big! You don't know where to look first," Yukinoshita said as her head swiveled back and forth.

And you have no sense of direction, either…

Komachi took a moment to think. "Hmm…yeah. Guys, what kind of stuff do you want to buy?"

"I'm thinking I'm gonna check out a place that sells accessories or knickknacks or something…," Yuigahama said. "What about you guys?"

Then, surprisingly, Zaimokuza made a suggestion. "For Christmas, toys. And for toys, R Us!"

"Ahhh, the lyrics in their ad jingle are pretty good, huh?" I said. "Really sticks with you."

"How did that song go again?" Totsuka asked.

So I tried humming their ad jingle. *Ummm… I think it was something like this…* "I wanna stay a kiiiid, hmm hm hm hm hm, hmm hm hm? No, that's not it. Nya? Nya nyaa nyaa, I don't wanna grow up, I don't wanna get a job…"

When I tried singing it, I felt the air hanging heavier overhead. *H-huh? Was this song that dark?*

Totsuka could sense it, too; his smile was a little strained. "W-was that how the song went…? I'm impressed you remember the last part when you just hummed most of it… Oh, but there is an R Us right around here, you know."

"Herm. Then let us enter."

"Ohhh, I like that idea," I agreed with Zaimokuza. "I'm getting kind of excited."

The guys were into the idea, but Yuigahama made no attempt to hide her disinterest. “Huh? We’re going in here?”

As if to console her, Komachi took Yuigahama’s arm. “Come on, I think they have stuff for parties, too, so why not?”

“Now that you mention it, they do. I wonder if they have party poppers as well.” After mulling this over, Yukinoshita agreed.

So did Totsuka. “Yeah, let’s try looking for some.”

Following after Totsuka, I went into the R Us, too.

…But still, party poppers? You’re awfully invested in the festivities, huh, Miss Yukinoshita…? Oh well. It’s a good thing.

X X X

Christmas-themed displays decorated the store’s interior, joining the typical toy-store whimsy to create a little dream or a magical kingdom. Even reluctant Yuigahama let out an appreciative “Ohhh” of delight.

A toy store really is a place where you can return to the innocence of childhood. Seriously, I don’t want to grow up. I don’t want to get a job…

As I was walking around this exciting place, I encountered someone familiar. She was squatting in front of the plastic-model shelf.

It was Miss Hiratsuka.

I was struggling to find words when the teacher noticed me and called out. “Oh? Hikigaya…”

“M-Miss Hiratsuka…”

“Ah, Miss Hiratsuka.”

“Oh, the others are with you?” our teacher said, noticing the rest of the crew following us.

“What are you doing here?” Yuigahama asked.

“H-hmm. You know… I-it’s for work.”

Uh, that’s definitely a lie… She really hesitated to say that, and she was sweating even though the heat was hardly on.

But Yuigahama’s eyes were wide and innocent. “Huh, that’s tough. It’s Christmas and everything.”

“Urk, nghhh, y-yeah, well, that’s how my work is… It’s part of being a guidance counselor. We can’t have you kids getting carried

away during the winter break and causing problems. M-man, the struggle! Work-life balance issues, you know. Lately, work has been taking over my dinner table conversations. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha…"

"Miss Hiratsuka, that smile isn't going to your eyes…" Totsuka seemed frightened of the hollow laughter.

After she got a little of it out of her system, she regained her composure. "…So I'm here for work. But what about all of you?"

"We're about to have a party, so we're shopping. Oh, hey, why don't you come with us?" Yuigahama offered.

Miss Hiratsuka folded her arms and closed her eyes. "Hmm… Well, I can't let you go too crazy. Maybe I'll tag along for a bit," she said. "I don't have any plans anyway…"

Her quiet addition made Komachi tilt her head. "But what about work…?"

"Drop it, Komachi. Don't listen." Gently grabbing Komachi's shoulder, I stopped her.

Fortunately, Miss Hiratsuka just began giddily fishing around the shelf, so she probably didn't hear. "Now that we've made plans, I'm getting excited all of a sudden! See, look, Hikigaya! Look at all the toys!"

Watching Miss Hiratsuka, Yukinoshita muttered, "That was quite an about-face…"

"I guess she's decided not to give a damn…" Well, resilience is a virtue, right?

As I was interpreting this positively, Miss Hiratsuka was pulling all sorts of things from the shelf and smiling beatifically at me. "Look, Hikigaya, how about a Mini 4WD? They're addictive when you start as an adult. And then there's B-Daman, Hyper Yo-Yo, Beyblade… I guess Transformers have to be my favorite. No, Zoids are hard to resist, too. Ahhh, but you can't forget about the trading card games, either."

Her priorities lined up well with us boys, which may have been why Zaimokuza jumped on it.

"Aye, the new *Precious Memories*, full of foil-stamped cards with cast autographs and original illustrations, are now on sale from Movic to rave reviews!"

"What's this random ad…?" He even sounded like a real announcer, irritatingly enough.

Totsuka nodded, too. "Card games are fun, huh? I used to play them a lot, too… Fair Play, Fair Duel!"

“You lack the hunger! A man must go with the superalloy! *HIKARI NI NAREEE!*”

“Come on, man. All your yelling is making me want one, too…” Zaimokuza was saying it in such a cool way, the allure of the toys was getting to me.

Meanwhile, the girls had put some distance between us, giving us cold looks.

“…Agh, boys like that stuff, huh?” Yuigahama sounded exasperated.

Komachi said soothingly, “Boys will be boys, after all.”

“So why has Miss Hiratsuka joined in with them as well…?” Yukinoshita looked puzzled, but I didn’t find it so mysterious. I mean, this is Miss Hiratsuka, after all. There are no true mysteries in the world.

The guys and Miss Hiratsuka were still scouring the shelves of the R Us when Totsuka tug-tugged at the hem of my coat. “Oh, hey, Hachiman, look, look. They have lots of Gunpla.”

Looking over, I saw shelves packed with Gundam model kits.

“Ohhh. You’re right. You like that stuff?” I asked.

That didn’t quite fit with my impression of Totsuka. Of course, that was partly because of the way he looks, but also, because he’s on a sports team. I never got the idea that he was into that sort of thing.

Totsuka’s gaze dropped to the floor, and he muttered, a little shyly, “…Yeah, I love…” I couldn’t hear the last word, but that was enough for me.

“…M-me too!”

“Huh?” Totsuka stared back at me.

Whoa, yikes. That’s what happens when you hear what you want to hear. My burning pathos is overflowing. Gotta be careful about that.

“Oh, uh, sorry. I couldn’t really hear you, so I said something funny. Sorry, but could you say it five more times?”

“Waaait! Hachiman!”

Zaimokuza grabbed my shoulder to stop me, and I came to my senses with a gasp. I didn’t even realize I was saying it. Of course, the blush dusting Totsuka’s bashful cheeks and reluctant hesitance to look at me were partially to blame, but the way he tilted his head a little and widened his eyes in the perfect gesture of innocence, confusion, and surprise was just so cute, I couldn’t help it.

When I gave Zaimokuza a look of gratitude, he was already tapping on his phone while he pushed up his glasses. “I’ll prepare the recording equipment, so buy some time!”

“Yeah, leave it to me!”

What a dependable man, that Zaimokuza! Even I never had the idea of recording Totsuka’s voice to listen to it morning and evening and make it my alarm clock! He really is a creep! But I approve! However, this is for private use only! Because I want it all to myself!

The moment I opened my mouth in an attempt to buy time, I was cut off by Komachi’s sigh. Mission failed!

“Whoa, that’s a disaster duo right there. Anyway, Bro, I remember you making stuff like this way back, too,” Komachi said, snatching up a Gunpla box.

“Yeah, though you’d always break them… Well, that’s the fate of the eldest boy.”

Seriously, when you have younger siblings, these plastic models don’t stand a chance. Siblings ruin your save data, too. Their foot will just randomly hit the console and make your adventure log disappear, and when you expressly save an extra file to see a certain scene again later, they’ll be like, *I wanted to start a new game, so I erased it* ☆. You may even shed a tear or two.

While I was sinking into some painful memories, I heard Totsuka’s sweet voice. “You did, Hachiman? Me too. My dad really liked them.”

“Huh. That’s kind of surprising,” I said. I’d assumed Totsuka would have been raised in a more refined and delicate manner. It was a little surprising to hear this hobby came from my father-in-law—whoops, I mean his dad.

Hiding his mouth with his hand, Totsuka giggled. “You think? I mean, I’m a boy, you know?” He tilted his head a little as if testing me, peering up at my face from below. He was only a tiny bit closer, but I choked anyway.

Until Zaimokuza peered at me the same way. *Why?*

“That’s right, Hachiman. Someone this cute can’t be a girl!”

“Urk, that’s right; he is a boy, huh, ngh…”

It seemed Miss Hiratsuka had been observing this stupid conversation of ours, as she came up to us. Grabbing a Master Grade, she gave it a good look. “Oh, Gunpla, huh? I hear these days, girls make them, too… Before long, this might be a good hobby for

your love life."

"Are you serious? Komachi might be a little interested now… *Sparkle!* ☆" Her eyes shone.

Miss Hiratsuka turned to her with a challenging grin. "Oh? Well then, Hikigaya the younger, why don't you have a Gunpla competition with me?"

As Komachi and Miss Hiratsuka faced off, Yukinoshita boldly stepped forward, too. For some reason. "If you're having a competition, then I cannot accept anything less than victory."

"She jumped on it as soon as she heard *competition*, huh?" I muttered. "But she's usually such a Miss Yarukinainen. So competitive…" How would you do a competition with Gunpla anyway? Who has the best workmanship?

As I wondered about the specifics, I could tell that in Komachi terms, she just wanted to do it and didn't give a damn about how. With a bold smile, she pointed aggressively at both Miss Hiratsuka and then Yukinoshita. "Heh-heh-heh, so be it! Then it's a game! If you beat Komachi, as a prize…I will give you my brother!"

"Oh-ho…" Miss Hiratsuka looked at Komachi sharply.

Oh no, she actually looks serious!

"…Hey, Komachi-chan?" I said. "I know you don't want your brother, but don't fake diplomatic tactics to get rid of him, okay? Let me just say, that's—"

"No, no! That's an awful idea!" Yuigahama cut off what I was about to say.

My attention was drawn to her as she interrupted. "O-okay… Well, it is an awful idea…"

"Ah…um, it's not that it's awful, more like, uh…"

Our eyes met, and then the both of us looked away.

"…"

"…"

And then we both went silent, too. *What the heck is this? I want to die all of a sudden.*

Komachi could tell something was off about the two of us, and she looked between us. "Ohhh? Ah? Komachi's never seen this before… Could this be…?" Her eyes immediately started sparkling.

Oh no, dear Komachi, don't look at your big brother with those eyes…, I was thinking when Zaimokuza butted in with utter disinterest. "Hachiman, I really don't care about all that, but can I just choose some Gunpla already?" He'd been watching this from a

distance, apparently.

"Uh, oh, yeah. I'm gonna go look over there for a bit, too." When I headed briskly over to where Zaimokuza was, I could hear Komachi behind me clicking her tongue.

"Tsk, that Special Snowflake… Way to ruin the moment…"

"Heh, I guess this means our competition comes later. Well, let's go take a look around, too," Miss Hiratsuka said, and we all began hunting around the R Us.

Zaimokuza, Totsuka, and I stood in a row before the Gunpla displays.

"I'm kinda tired now…," I said with a sigh.

"Ah, Hachiman. Why don't you choose something, too?" Noticing that I was standing beside him, Totsuka turned back to me.

"But I don't really know about the recent ones. I don't trust myself to pick a good one…"

"It's okay—you don't have to worry about it! With Gunpla, there are no limits except your own imagination!" Totsuka's eyes sparkled as he gushed, and his smile was dazzling…

"If you put it like that, now I wanna build some… Then I guess I'll go with this…" Rummaging around through a few, I picked up one that spoke to me.

Then that bastard Zaimokuza sighed dramatically. "Ahhh, Hachiman, I see you're choosing that one, huh? That's the one you want to go with…"

"Huh? What, something wrong with it?" I looked at Zaimokuza, wondering what the problem was.

But he was vague. "Oh, there's nothing *wrong* with it, per se. But… But *that* one, huh…?"

"God, you're annoying… This is why some people can't stand *otaku*… I'm fine with this one, okay? With this mobile suit…I will become a super pilot," I said with calm, collected poise, and Zaimokuza responded by acting way cooler than he needed to.

"Oh-ho, then with this mobile suit shining inside the storm, now it's your tuuuurn!"

As the both of us glared at each other with unkind smirks on our faces, Yuigahama started clapping and stepped between us. "Okay, no more. You don't know who this present is going to. Make sure you actually think this through, you two."

"Ngh, okay…"

After hearing that, the both of us obediently returned the

Gunpla to the shelf. *Then I have to go for a model kit with broader appeal, huh…?* I was about to pick up another Gunpla box when Yuigahama stopped me.

"Okay, choose something else! One present per person!"

"Are you my mom or something…?"

Komachi, who'd been watching this disaster from a distance, *hmm*'d a little in thought before clapping her hands. "If I hang around with you guys, I may not get any shopping done at all, so how about we just go our own ways now?"

"Yeah, that might be a good idea," Totsuka agreed.

Yuigahama shot up her hand, too. "Agreed! Once we're done shopping, let's meet up in front of the cake shop."

"All right, then see you later," said Yukinoshita, and at that, we all scattered.

…Okay, I guess I'll choose a present, too.

X X X

After leaving the toy store, I wandered around the shopping mall. There were all sorts of other places, but though I tried peeking into storefronts, nothing really seemed right. Also, the staff would immediately start closing in on me when I was just taking a look, and I'd dash off on instinct.

I finally went into a shop full of knickknacks and miscellany where the staff couldn't come speak to me, but I had no idea what I should choose.

"I know I'm supposed to choose a present here, but…I don't even know who's gonna wind up with this… This is hard; you gotta find something useful that everyone will more or less enjoy…"

As I was muttering to myself (my special skill) and gathering my thoughts, suddenly a figure was standing behind me. "Heh-heh-heh, it seems you're in trouble."

"Oh, Komachi? Well, you're not wrong."

I turned around to see Komachi striking a fearless pose. Then she stuck up a finger. "Times like these, you want something that'll disappear, Bro."

"Disappear?"

What does she mean? What 'disappears'? Ninjas? Or ghosts…?

When I gave her a confused look, Komachi continued. “Yeah, something you can get rid of easily. Something that won’t last too long.”

“O-okay… You’re assuming they’re gonna get rid of it…?” Why does she say such sort-of-terrifying things?

But I knew what she meant—something that will go away, something that will be consumed when you use it. Like snacks, or tea, or daily necessities and whatnot, that sort of thing. She was right; those are easy to get rid of.

I was convinced. Meanwhile, Komachi continued further. “Things that you wear have more weight to them, you know? Like accessories or expensive items.”

“Scary… My little sister is showing me how a girl thinks… Well, I’ll take another look.”

“Yeah, good luck. Then see you later.”

“Okay,” I said. Komachi must been after something herself, as she briskly trotted off. I casually raised a hand to say good-bye, then scratched hard at my head.

“Things that you wear have more weight, huh? Well, that’s true…”

And those things are uncomfortable for the one getting them, too, huh?

“Right, guess I’ll go look… Something that Totsuka would like… Something Totsuka would like, hmm…”

With renewed determination, I decided to enter a nearby store.

X X X

The shopping mall was pretty crowded, but one store was still comparatively calm. Going inside, I rummaged through lots of stuff, as I had in quite a few other stores.

This shop seemed to be a general store with all sorts of items: housewares, small articles, tableware and beyond. I had no complaints with their product lineup, but very often, the more choices you have, the more paralyzed you become, which was my current predicament.

“Agh… What should I buy…? I’ve been looking around for a while, but I have no idea what would be good…”

As I was grumbling, I heard a voice from the other side of a shelf. “Ah, Hikki. You’re looking here, too?”

“Oh, Yuigahama. In my opinion, I don’t know what counts as miscellaneous for these miscellaneous stores.” I gently returned to the shelf the item I’d picked up, some Asian-flavor miscellaneous item whose purpose I couldn’t guess.

Yuigahama ambled up beside me with a bit of a wry smile. “Hmm, yeah, I guess it’s kind of hard when anything goes, huh…?”

“*Anything goes* is dangerous. Anything defined by subjective personal opinion will always lead you to disaster down the line.”

This isn’t really limited to presents—things that lack in a shared perception will always be the seeds of conflict. Perhaps it’s times like these when you need the innovation of a win-win relationship with a consensus as to the grand design. Whoops, I got a pretty big brain there.

“You don’t have to think so hard about it. Look, it’s the thought that counts. People are happy just knowing you were thinking about them, so…so anything is fine,” Yuigahama said, tapping her pointer fingers together.

I mean, I get that feelings are important.

But what are they worth if they’re not communicated? What’s the point of a thought that won’t reach anyone? I also don’t agree that feelings can justify just any choice.

I breathed a tiny sigh.

“The lack of restrictions is the problem… And besides, if you actually got Gunpla, you’d feel a little awkward, right?” I said.

Yuigahama blinked a bunch and averted her eyes slightly. “Oh… Well… You know, kinda… I might be…kinda worried about, like…how they thought of me…”

“Right? When you’re going to the trouble of giving someone a gift, you don’t want to make them feel awkward about it. So you have to be careful about picking it.”

If I’m ever handing someone a present and there’s that little silence before they say, …*Th-thanks* with forced enthusiasm, I’ll probably want to jump off a bridge.

While I fished around on the shelf, my mood was deteriorating as I saw it in my mind’s eye—but then Yuigahama suddenly chuckled. “You care so much about the weirdest things… Then I’ll be careful with what I pick, too.”

“Yeah, you better. You don’t know who’s gonna get it, after all.”

“That’s right,” she said, and she and I both picked up tableware and accessories and whatnot and then returned them to the shelf.

Yuigahama opened her mouth, apparently having trouble saying whatever she wanted to say. “…But it’d be nice if mine does go to you. Um, ’cause I never returned the favor for my birthday…”

“Huh?” I asked, then realized just what she was referring to. That felt like so long ago, but it was really only six months. She had to be talking about the present I’d given her. But I feel like that present had been an excuse to satisfy my own selfish feelings. Her birthday was just an excuse, too.

“Ohhh, well,” I said, “it wasn’t anything like that, so don’t worry. That was my way of returning a favor to you. If you return the favor back, it’ll never end.”

This logic was probably selfish. But it was all I had, so this was the only way I could say it.

But Yuigahama didn’t look at me, instead saying in a quiet whisper, “I almost wish it wouldn’t, though…”

That nonchalant remark stuck in my heart.

“…Yeah, maybe.”

“…Uh-huh.”

Both of us suddenly went silent.

I can’t imagine a relationship that doesn’t end. Maybe in a dream or a fantasy—but that’s an idea. I doubt it’s possible in reality.

As beautiful as it is, it’s also painful, and I couldn’t find the words to respond to Yuigahama.

She broke that silence with a bright smile. “Oh, I know. It’s almost Yukinon’s birthday.”

“Oh yeah, I heard about that before.” I didn’t know the exact date, but I seemed to recall it was in the winter.

Yuigahama took something from the shelf and immediately returned it. After a few rounds of this, she glanced over at me. “For my birthday, you went with Yukinon to shop for a present, right?”

“Yeah, Komachi was with us, too, though.”

“H-hmm,” Yuigahama replied listlessly, and with a light *click*, she set down the item she’d been holding, then kept staring at the shelf. “Then I’d like you to…g-go out with me…um, shopping…”

I looked at the shelf, too, distractedly picking up the thing Yuigahama had just been holding.

I had no real reason to refuse a shopping trip. I think. I had

indeed gone out with Yukinoshita before, and there was a clear goal here.

I'd made a promise to go somewhere with Yuigahama, but I figured this wasn't quite the same. Maybe it would be best to think about this as a more casual thing.

With a subtle sigh that I made sure she wouldn't notice, I looked up again. "Hmm… Shopping, huh…? Well, we could do that anytime."

"Yeah…" With that short reply, Yuigahama turned her face away in slight embarrassment. I realized she was looking at Yukinoshita. Apparently, she'd also come to this shop to choose a present.

"Oh, it's Yukinon. Then we'll talk about this again later. Heeey, Yukinooon!" Yuigahama said quickly, then pattered toward Yukinoshita.

"Oh? It's Yuigahama and Hikigaya." Yukinoshita turned around, and Yuigahama put a hand on her shoulder.

"Yukinon. Have you decided what you'll buy yet?"

"No, not yet. Though I did get plenty of advice from Komachi…"

Hmm, so Yukinoshita was with Komachi?

"I don't see her, though…," I said.

"She's over there."

Yukinoshita pointed, and indeed, there she was. But… Something was a little odd.

"Oh, there you are. Heeey, Komachi… What're you doing?"

As I looked at her, I saw that Komachi was collapsed into a giant cushion and completely unresponsive. Her eyes were kind of hollow, staring into nothing. When I called out to her, she snapped out of it with a gasp.

"Oh my god, Bro. This is amazing! This sofa literally turns you into a couch potato! Oh, wow, I actually don't know if I'll ever get up. Oh no, maybe Komachi'll just stay like this…" She continued to sink limply down into the sofa.

So this is the power of the potato couch…

"Huh, is it that good? …Now I'm real curious." I wanted to try it out, too; maybe it'd be nice to collapse into the sofa right there and have a little nap time with Komachi. I was taking a wobbly step forward when a voice stopped me in my tracks.

"Oh, but that's excessive for Hikigaya, isn't it? He's already

quite useless."

I turned around to see Yukinoshita smiling brightly.

"Don't give me that sweet little smile," I shot back. "I mean, if you multiply a negative by a negative, it becomes a positive, you know."

"And if you add a negative to a negative, it just makes the negative bigger. Didn't you learn math in middle school?"

"Hold on there. You need to look at this from another angle. You could also distribute to make everyone negative. Listen, Yukinoshita. If everyone's equally useless, no one is," I said.

Yukinoshita expelled a great sigh. "You still have that same misguided notion of equality. I think that sofa is too much for you after all."

Komachi finally stood, apparently listening to this pointless argument. "Phew. Up we go… Well, you're right. My brother isn't wasteful, after all. He just wants someone supporting him. In Komachi terms, he should get a wife who spoils him instead of a couch. ♪ *Glance! Glance, glance, glance!*"

"Huh?! Um, huh, well, um… I, uh, like…" Yuigahama had been watching us with an awkward smile, but she seemed startled at that. All her attempts to speak ended in failure.

Good thing, too… I think anything she would say right now would just make me want to die…

Meanwhile, Yukinoshita was shrugging off Komachi's look. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Komachi, but I doubt that wish will come true. It's impossible for him."

"Huh, you think so? That makes Komachi sad… I want someone to take over soon…"

Hmm, Komachi, you've really been working to get rid of your big brother lately, hmm? You don't have to push him out of the nest just yet, though…

Well, I was grateful that Yukinoshita had swiftly cut off Komachi's pointless appeal, but I couldn't accept her claim. "Hey? Could you not shatter my dreams with a single remark?" I retorted.

Yukinoshita slid a chilly look my way. "You may complain about everything, but you do take care of what you have to, don't you?"

"Ahhh, I kinda get that. Hikki seems like he'll complain every day while he actually does what he's supposed to," Yuigahama said, nodding.

Komachi turned back to me. “You heard her, Bro,” she said.

Suddenly, unpleasant images started racing around my mind. “Oh. Actually, I get that feeling, too… I’m so worried I’ll wind up getting worked to the bone for a low wage, cursing the company as I scrape together a normal paycheck through overtime pay or something, and then I’ll acclimate to it and accept my fate. *Phew*, I’ll tell myself, *maybe this life isn’t so bad…*, and then I’ll be completely assimilated and happily living my life as a corporate slave… I have so many anxieties about my future…”

“That was weirdly graphic…”

“But he seems anxious about the wrong things, don’t you think…?”

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita both wore haggard expressions. Seriously, no dreams or hope here.

“That’s exactly why I want to have a dream, at least. I will become a househusband…”

“It’s always baffling to me how such worthless conclusions come from such a gifted imagination…” Yukinoshita sighed dramatically.

“Come on, now; you know my brother. That’s just how he is, so could you not ask too much from him?” Komachi offered a defense that was no defense at all.

“Indeed. I’ve already given up.”

“Ah, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha. W-well, nothing you can do.”

The both of them were saying awful things, while Komachi peered at my face gladly. “You hear that, Bro?! Isn’t that great?!”

“No, no, that’s not great at all. They’re giving up on me and saying I’m hopeless.” They had judged me to be about as useless as you can get. That’s as damning as the manager at your part-time job saying, *…Aghhhh, you don’t have to do anything anymore*.

But in Komachi terms, that apparently was not so; she was still smiling. “Hmm? You think? I think it’s a good thing, though… Heh-heh, oh well. Guess we don’t need this sofa.”

“Yeah. If we need a sofa, we’ve already got a fluffy hairball lying around at home,” I said.

Komachi nodded as if that convinced her. “Oh, Kaa? Bet he’d be glad to have this sofa, though. He’d flop out on it all day long.”

Yeah, yeah, I bet. Why do cats immediately monopolize sofas and futons anyway?

Apparently, it wasn’t just cats; Yuigahama clapped her hands,

apparently imagining something herself. “That’s true! I feel like my Sablé would hop all over this! Maybe I’ll buy it!”

“Uh, I think he’d probably sink deep into it, though… If our cat took a nap on this, he’d probably sink, too,” I said.

Immediately, Yukinoshita froze in her tracks. “…If he were taking a catnap, you mean? …Your cat is so cute.”

D-did a girl just walk by with a really bad pun just now…? It was so quiet… Maybe I was just hearing things. I looked over at Yukinoshita to see she’d already transformed back and was looking at me with a crisp expression.

“Listen, Hikigaya, perhaps it would be good to buy this sofa after all. A pet is a member of the family; if you’re going to cherish your Christmas together with your family, you need a present for everyone.”

“I see that smug expression on your face. You obviously think that logic is flawless, so could you stop acting all bashful? And your logic is about as airtight as a beehive.” *Or is she bashful because you could bash her logic full of holes?*

As I was thinking about how to avoid Yukinoshita’s suggestion, Komachi tugged on my sleeve. “Oh, Bro. But there are also small cushions that go with this sofa. Wouldn’t one of those be good?”

Looking over, I saw some cushions made of the same materials. Yukinoshita gave one of them a stroke and nodded. “This size would be good for a cat, wouldn’t it? Right, Hikigaya?”

“Why are your values so cat focused…? Well, I’ll think about it. I’m gonna go look at a bunch of other stuff.” I got the feeling that if I stayed any longer, they would actually make me buy cushions for the cat. I decided to just be vague and avoid commitment.

It seemed the others all had things they were thinking about buying, too.

“Okay, then I’ll see you later,” Yuigahama said. After they all said good-bye, I left.

X X X

I’d finished buying a present for the exchange and, er, a few other things, so I decided to head for the cake shop where we’d be meeting up.

The paper bag in my hand rustled when I adjusted my grip on it and checked the clock.

"Phew… Welp, got what I needed. And this is where we're meeting, so I think we're good. It's just about time…"

The others would be coming soon, so I decided to stand there and zone out. While I was clicking away on my phone, I heard someone calling out like a lazy late-night convenience store part-timer greeting customers.

"…Welcome…wanna caaake…"

"Hmm? That's an obnoxious, yet familiar-sounding voice…"

When I looked over with an intimidating glance, meaning to communicate *You're so annoying*, I saw the drawled greetings were coming from a boy in a Santa suit who was selling cakes in front of the shop.

"…Welcome…wanna caaake…"

This guy was really obnoxious, but I couldn't just leave our meeting spot. I tried not to pay attention to him, but he was so annoying, I wound up looking at him anyway.

Then our eyes met.

"…Wait. Huh? It's Hikitani!" The lazy Santa addressed me in a friendly manner.

I thought he was annoying—so it was Tobe, huh?

"Oh, you startled me… Hey, Tobe… You suddenly said my name, so I thought it was a friend…"

I was a little put off by Tobe's overfamiliarity, but he didn't seem to mind that and just kept talking to me. "Dude, hell of a coincidence running into you out here, huh? I'm working at this cake place right now, and I've really got nothing to do."

"Ahhh, so that's why you've got the Santa costume… Wait, you have nothing to do at your job…?"

"Yeah, there's no customers coming. Man, I'm so bored," Tobe complained apathetically, tugging on the hair at the back of his neck.

But even if Tobe complained to me, I couldn't help him kill time, and I could only offer him a very brief reply.

"Really?"

"Yeah. For real."

"Huh…"

"Man, I'm totally bored…"

"I see…"

Unsurprisingly, Tobe figured out that this conversation wasn't going anywhere and awkwardly groped for something else to say.

"… Ahhh… So, like? Hikitani, what're you doing here?"

This attempt at starting a conversation felt really forced. *Um, sorry for making you feel like you have to be nice to me?*

"Uh, just shopping for stuff," I answered. Since he was trying to chat, the bare minimum of etiquette dictated that I give him a reply, if nothing else.

Tobe seemed happy to have jump-started a conversation, leaning forward eagerly. "Dude, shopping? Like what, what're you getting? I didn't know you went shopping! That's wild."

Uh, of course I go shopping… Just what does he think I am…?

What do I do? This conversation is already running out of steam, and there isn't really anything I want to talk about with Tobe, either… As I was standing there uncomfortably, someone came to a stop nearby.

"Hikigaya, what's going on?"

"Hey, Yukinoshita. I ran into Tobe."

Yukinoshita had come over, I assumed because we'd be meeting up soon. When she heard the name, she tilted her head in confusion. *Uh, it's Tobe, okay? Tobe. Why are you confused? You don't know him?*

But Tobe was even more confused than Yukinoshita. He looked at me, then her, and back again. "Ohhh? Ohhh? Yukinoshita? Why're the two of you shopping together? …Oh, hmm."

"Hey, what was that pause? What—what are you imagining here?" I asked, but it seemed Tobe had already come to a conclusion in his head, and he was examining the two of us with a *hmmm*.

Yukinoshita did not seem pleased with this curious look from Tobe, and she twisted around uncomfortably. "……It seems you're misunderstanding something, but…it's not really…" At the beginning, Yukinoshita was giving Tobe a crisp glare, but her voice gradually lowered until I had no idea how her sentence ended.

Tobe wasn't even listening to her as he clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Dude, okay, I wish I'd known what was going on. I totally woulda given you more space that time at Destiny Land and stuff, for real."

"Uh, that's not what's going on…" I more or less knew what Tobe's misunderstanding was, but he still wasn't listening.

Yukinoshita seemed irritated by his behavior. “…Can I go already?”

“Huh? Yeah. Uh, you’re the one who came to talk to me, though.” *Didn’t you want something?* I was implicitly asking.

For a silent moment, Yukinoshita looked away. “Oh…yes… Because of the Santa costume, I didn’t notice it was Tobe, so I just…” Still facing away, her voice vanished into nothingness before she finished.

Following her gaze, I saw Yuigahama coming over. She noticed us, too, and waved. “Hikkiii, Yukinooon. What’s up? …Huh? It’s Tobecchi.”

Tobe looked surprised, too, when she noticed him. “Wait, what? You were with them, too, Yui? ……Oh, huh.”

“Seriously, what are you imagining?” I said.

Tobe tugged at the hair at the back of his head, then smacked himself in the forehead. “Agh! The hell, man! Shopping with two girls, that’s, like, whoa! For real, Hikitani, you must be magic! You’re living the life! Livinitani! Magitani!”

“Uh, I’m lost, and my name isn’t even Hikitani,” I said, but Tobe was totally gone now, muttering to himself like, *Dude, dude*.

“Tobecchi, is this your job?” said Yuigahama. “We’ve come to shop for a Christmas party.”

“Ohhh, huh…” It seemed that explanation convinced Tobe. He nodded, and finally our meetup time had arrived. Totsuka and Komachi were on their way over, too.

“Oh, it’s Tobe.”

“Wow, long time no see!”

Tobe seemed excited to see more people he knew, and his hand shot up, forming the sign of the horns like Stan Hansen. “Heeey! It’s Totsuka and Hikitani’s little sister! Weeei!”

“The hell’s with that greeting? Obnoxious,” I grumbled.

“Ah, ah-ha-ha… Hey, it’s Tobecchi, so…” Yuigahama had already given up on him, while Yukinoshita gave Tobe a close look.

“It’s like some tribal greeting…,” Yukinoshita commented. “I honestly don’t know what he’s saying…”

“Right? He’s incomprehensible.” I shot Tobe a dull look.

But he wasn’t paying attention at all. “Merry C! Weeei!”

“See, there he goes…,” I began, but then Komachi responded with the same greeting.

“Weeei! Merry C!”

Totsuka seemed mildly confused, but he was drawn into the wave of enthusiasm next to him. “W-weeei!”

“Weeei!”

“Huh?! Even Hikki’s joined in?!”

Ah! Oh no! I didn’t mean to… B-but come on. If I’m with Totsuka and Komachi, then wei *is actually a-okay.*

Tobe looked around excitedly once everyone had responded to his greeting. “Okay, so are you all, like, gonna go party together? … Wait, huh? I see Zaimokuzaki with you, too. Zaimokuzaki, weeei!”

Who the hell is Zaimokuzaki? But it turned out to be Zaimokuza. *When did he show up? Impressive of you to notice, Tobe…*, I thought, looking over. Zaimokuza himself seemed taken aback by the sudden address.

“Weh? W-weh?! W-weeei?!”

“Ugh. All those wei nuts should go and die.”

“Bro,” Komachi cut in, “if you feel that way, you need to at least try to hide it.”

Oh, sweet Komachi. You may say that, but you know—it’s just really, really annoying.

And the source of that aggravation, Zaimokuza, looked confused as he muttered, “Wei, wei, oh… W…eight man?! So in Japanese, *Hachi*man?!”

“Hmm?!”

“Who is he? Whomst, what creature is he?”

“Oh, that’s Tobe. He’s in my class. He’s obnoxious, but he’s got a good heart. And everything about him is annoying.” I gave him the gist about Tobe.

Zaimokuza nodded. “I see, I see. ’Tis indeed true. Especially his long hair and the loudness of his voice, and his overfamiliar attitude, too.”

“Pot, meet kettle…” *Everything you just said fits you, too, you know…*

“But how doth he know my name…? And he’s even altered it like a code name… Ah, could he be from the organization?!”

“That’s right. Unlike you, he’s part of a group, so… Sure. He’s from the organization.”

“Yes, yes, as I am not unaffiliated with any… Wait, heeeeeey! Hachiman! Heeeeey!” Zaimokuza shouted, smacking his chest.

I know it’s a thing to pretend to go along with the joke, but that wasn’t funny. “Zaimokuza really is more obnoxious after all…”

Suddenly, Tobe's voice didn't bother me that much anymore.

And as for Tobe, he had apparently just thought of something. "Ohhh, so, like, you guys are all having a Christmas party?"

"Yeah, that's right," said Yuigahama.

"So, uh, you wanna buy a cake? This cake shop belongs to my buddy's parents. And he asked me to help. They've got crazy leftovers here."

"Hmm, cake, huh. I dunno." As Yuigahama was deliberating, a loud voice rang out through the shopping mall.

"I heard everything!"

"Huh? Miss Hiratsuka?"

Tobe was bewildered as Miss Hiratsuka strode into the scene, coat fluttering (despite the lack of wind) and heels clicking. "It seems you're struggling with unsold leftovers."

"That's right; it's bad, man." Tobe looked over at the tall display of Christmas cakes.

Miss Hiratsuka surveyed the tower, nodded, and then gave them a warm, soft look. "I understand… I will buy them all…… Unsold leftovers are lonely, after all."

"Hey? Let's stop projecting on the cakes, okay?" I said.

"Tobecchi, forget she said that," Yuigahama swiftly advised Tobe. She must have sensed that Miss Hiratsuka might have been serious.

"Plus, we wouldn't be able to eat all of them," Komachi added.

"We could buy one, but it would only be a drop in the bucket," Yukinoshita advised.

Their remarks seemed to discourage Tobe. "But seriously, I have to sell these," he said weakly. "My buddy'll freak for real if I don't. What do you call it? Like, workplace harassment? So, like, couldn't you think of something?"

Totsuka tilted his head. "You mean, a plan to sell the cakes?"

"But I dunno, though… There's not much we can do now." I was mulling over ideas when Yuigahama flung up her hand.

"Oh!"

"Yes, Yuigahama. Tell us."

"Make them cheaper!"

"That could work." Tobe nodded at Yuigahama's simple and clear answer.

Zaimokuza cleared his throat with confidence and proposed another idea. "Herpum, add a bonus to convince them they're

getting a good deal! We could add on my new novel…"

"That won't work." Tobe was being a little obnoxious, flinging his arms up like an American, but Totsuka's pensive face made up for it.

And when the idea struck, Totsuka opened his mouth. "How about a service? Like writing your name on it the way they do for birthday cakes?"

"Yeah, maybe," said Tobe.

Yukinoshita nodded thoughtfully. "Or engraving limited-edition merchandise."

"That could work, too," Tobe immediately responded.

He's okay with anything, isn't he…?

But despite all our various suggestions, none of them were things Tobe could work out on his own authority. "Uh, these aren't gonna happen, are they? There's only so much you're allowed to do as a part-time employee. If you don't like getting harassed, just flake out and don't do it."

"That's dirty, man—you're so dirty, Hikitani! I can't just ditch, dude. C'mon, guys, gimme just one good idea here!"

He smacked his hands together in supplication; I'd feel guilty if I refused. Wondering if there was anything Tobe could do on his own discretion that would actually work, given the current situation, I looked around the cart stacked with cakes to discover some stickers in front of the register. …*Well, it's just about time for that, right?*

"Hmm… Oh, I know. These cakes are gonna be on sale later, right? Why don't you start that earlier? Look, there's half-price stickers over there," I said.

And then for some reason, Miss Hiratsuka was the one who twitched. "Urk, half price… That's right… Past the twenty-fourth, and you're half-price… Past the twenty-fifth, and it's bargain-sale mode…"

"We are talking about cakes, right? Christmas cakes?" I tried to confirm with her, but she didn't even hear me.

"Why no sales, when it's such a good deal…? Agh…," Miss Hiratsuka said as she reached out to the half-price stickers.

"Th-this is bad—Miss Hiratsuka has started putting half-price stickers on herself. Hurry! Hurry, someone, marry her!" I cried.

Yuigahama also came in to help stop her. "Y-you'll be okay, Miss Hiratsuka! Half-price is a fantastic deal! Sales tax has gone up,

too, after all!"

"That doesn't help…," I muttered.

"Indeed, with the sales tax, there's that last-minute demand before the increase, so it's different from Miss Hiratsuka."

Hey! Miss Yukinoshita!

Don't make it worse! Stopppp! Someone, hurry up and marry her! She's got so much bang for your buck!

I honestly do want someone to take her. 'Cause I mean, if no one else does, I might just slip and marry her myself. Why can't she get married anyway…? This is one of the top three seven wonders of the world, actually.

"Well, as for a realistic option, perhaps just hawking the goods," Yukinoshita suggested.

Tobe reacted to that idea. "Ah, that could work! See, see! We have an extra Santa suit. And there's reindeer antlers and stuff," he said, and he immediately grabbed the other suit from behind the cash register.

Examining the Santa suit, Yuigahama made thoughtful noises. "But it doesn't look like it would fit a girl."

"So then a boy should do it, I suppose," Yukinoshita said.

Tobe looked around at us guys. "Well, but it'd be tough for Zaimokuzaki. So then…like, Totsuka?"

"Huh? M-me, wear that?" Totsuka was surprised, and I was, too.

"Why'd you ignore me?"

"Customer service would be a little tough for you, Bro, so that's just how it goes… Knock 'em dead, Totsuka!" Komachi clapped a hand on my shoulder, then smiled at Totsuka.

"O-okay then, I guess I'll put it on…" Totsuka seemed surprisingly eager about it, maybe because he was actually being treated like a boy. Taking the Santa suit from Tobe, he immediately started getting changed behind the register. "Hnn… There we go…"

We could hear the sound of rustling clothes and a few alluring grunts. For some reason, all of us turned around, fearing that we shouldn't look.

When Totsuka was done getting changed, he stepped out toward us. "H-how is it…?" He squirmed around shyly.

I couldn't help sighing. "Ohhh…"

The Santa suit was a little baggy and big on him, so it also looked like a miniskirt, and the way he was constantly worrying

over the hem and tug-tugging at it was adorable. He was fiddling shyly with the Santa hat in one of his hands, sneaking it over his face to hide it. His reddened cheeks and white skin together were so sweet.

Tobe, good job!!! Tobe really is a good guy after all… Maybe I could be friends with him. If I remember this next week. My memory of Tobe will disappear in a week…

Tobe was also nodding in satisfaction. “Oh, not bad, huh? Okay, come out to sell the stuff with me… Just say ‘Welcome, wanna caaake…?’”

Tobe demonstrated how he’d been hawking his wares, but would this even count as an example…?

Yukinoshita’s brows came together slightly. “I have no idea what he’s saying…”

I explained, “Listening comprehension is a challenge for late-night convenience store language… I think in Japanese, he’d be saying, *Welcome, how about a cake?*”

Totsuka’s eyes sparkled at me. “Wow, you can understand it, Hachiman? Th-then I’ll give it a shot. W-welcome. H-how about…a cake?”

Instantly, there was action.

“Ferm, then I shall have seven trillion of these cakes you offer!”

“Ah, pardon me, cake for me as well, please.” Coming up behind Zaimokuza, I was pulling money from my wallet and waiting in line when I heard Yukinoshita’s exasperated sigh.

“Why are *you* buying one…?”

“Oh, whoops. He was so cute, I just…”

“Oh, but now I think it’s gotten a little crowded,” Yuigahama said, and I noticed shoppers looking our way with interest. Then they looked at the showcase, the menu board, and the stacks of cakes, and started murmuring among themselves. It seemed some of them were ready to buy a cake on the spot. At this rate, it seemed like they’d sell off without a problem.

Tobe could sense it, too, and he seemed relieved. “Man, this is like that thing, like, when you’ve got cute girls selling the stuff, huh?” he babbled aimlessly.

“Cute girls?! Heh-heh-heh-heh…” Miss Hiratsuka immediately reacted with a tiny smile.

Komachi struggled to speak for a moment. “Urk, the tears are making all the Christmas lights blurry… That’s right—you’re a girl,

too, Miss Hiratsuka. Yes, Komachi understands. Women are forever maidens, after all."

Maybe it was the customers gazing at the showcase, but now passersby were starting to pause, too. Tobe smiled in satisfaction at the scene. "Man, you totally saved my ass. Bet we could even sell out, now!"

"Oh, it's no big deal," said Yuigahama. "And, like, we haven't even done anything…"

Well, she was right about that.

Then, surveying the customers, Miss Hiratsuka said, "Hmm, I suppose having a line drew in a bigger line. It's the same with ramen shops."

"Isn't that just, like, a fake audience…?" *Well, either way, if this helps with Tobe's issue, then all's well that ends well*, I thought, looking over at the one who'd asked for help.

It seemed he was satisfied with the results, too. He thanked us, then pulled a cake out of the showcase. "You guys are having a party, right? Take some cake, as thanks. I'll even throw in some candles for ya! ☆"

"You don't put candles on a Christmas cake…," I commented.

For some reason, he did this big dramatic wink! ☆

Obnoxious…

But if he was offering this for free, then I was happy to take it. When I accepted the cake, Yuigahama offered her appreciation, too. "Thanks, Tobecchi!"

"Naw, man, you helped *me* here. It's totally nothing. Jooshy polly yey!" Tobe cheered with a thumbs-up. God, he needs to shut up. He's a good guy, but he needs to shut up.

"I have no idea what you're saying, but thank you very much." Komachi politely thanked him, and then we all rushed through our farewells and decided to leave. We'd get in the way of his work if we stayed any longer.

As we parted ways, Totsuka waved at him. "Then see you later, Tobe."

"Weeei, see ya," Tobe called, way too loud, and waved back at us as he handled customers. "…Man, I'm so jealous! I hope next year me and Ebina… Wait? Aren't entrance exams next year? Dude, aw man, dude!!"

With Tobe and his troubles behind us, we left the shopping mall.

X X X

After we left the shopping mall, Yuigahama guided us to a karaoke parlor in front of the station. An employee showed us to a room, where we all picked up a party popper.

Once everyone had one, we made eye contact. Yuigahama quietly said, “One, two…,” and then we pulled the strings as we cried:

“Merry Christmas!”

There was the *pop* of the confetti and the *pop* of the Chanmery sparkling juice opening, and then glasses clinking. We all wished each other a Merry Christmas.

Meanwhile, I was scanning the room. “So why is it karaoke again…?” I asked.

Setting out the plates, Yuigahama replied, “If we were at Yukinon’s place, we’d get complaints if we made too much noise. Here at karaoke, we can bring in the cake, too.”

“Uh, well, I guess it’s fine, then…”

While we were talking, Yukinoshita called over to us. “I cut the cake. I didn’t expect him to give us three of them,” she said.

Komachi nodded as she passed out the slices. “Tobe’s a good guy, huh?”

“Do you mean in the sense that we got free stuff from him,” I said, “or was that my imagination?”

Tobe *is* a good guy, but I got a strong feeling that, like, that was all he was. I kinda felt sorry for him. Isshiki uses him a lot, too…

While I was pondering Tobe’s future, Totsuka passed a plate to me. “Here, Hachiman. There’s fried chicken, too.”

“Ohhh, thanks.”

While everyone was serving up their chicken, Zaimokuza, sitting beside me, looked happy, while Miss Hiratsuka, opposite me, seemed to be having fun pouring the drinks.

“Hachiman, meat is good. Meat is good… Fried food will console your heart…”

“C’mon, drink, drink. It’s just Chanmery, but still!”

It seemed they were all enjoying the Christmas party. Fried chicken, cake, chatting, toasting…

But wait. Hold on.

Is this Christmas…? Such doubts would not leave my mind.

I slowly set down my glass, and the ice in it clinked as it settled.

"Hey, lemme ask something…"

"What?" Yuigahama turned to me with a mouth full of cake.

Looking her in the eye, I slowly asked her, "What's the difference between this and a birthday party, or even an after-party?"

"Huh?"

"Look, we're at karaoke again, eating dinner and having cake, and we did a toast… Does this mean this is the right way to spend Christmas? I'm getting the feeling this isn't much different from going 'Wei, wei,' and my sense of self is disintegrating…"

"W-well, um…" Unable to reply, Yuigahama quietly averted her gaze until it landed on Komachi.

As for Komachi herself, she scrunched up her face in disgust. "Aw, come *on*! You're such a drag, Bro!"

But it seemed I was not alone in my opinion. Yukinoshita's hands paused with a forkful of cake, and her eyes suddenly narrowed. "…Indeed, just what about this is different from a birthday party…?"

"Oh no! It's contagious! Stop it, quick!" Komachi commanded (Maybe we should call her *Comma-chi*?).

Miss Hiratsuka chuckled. "Hikigaya, you're like a *cheater*…" She said the word in English. "Just when you've taken one step forward, you immediately take two steps back…"

Miss Hiratsuka was looking a little proud of that one, but Yuigahama was baffled, whispering into Yukinoshita's ear beside her, "Hey, Yukinon, do *cheetahs* do that?"

"I—I don't know? I've never heard such a thing…" Cat expert Miss Yukipedia also looked stumped, also mishearing her.

Miss Hiratsuka moaned like she was in physical pain. "Ngh, s-so you don't get it, huh…? Of course… Totally different generation, huh…? Agh…" After such a close encounter with the generation gap, she sunk into gloomy despair.

Uh, though I don't think that's your generation, either…

"Agh! I don't really get what's going on here, but now you're killing the mood, too!" Komachi lamented.

That was when Totsuka suddenly realized something. "Oh, but look, Hachiman. We're trading presents, so that part is Christmassy, right?"

"Ohhh, you're right!"

Yes, trading presents does feel Christmassy. Everyone just gives to one person on a birthday, so a trade was a Christmas exclusive.

When I accepted this, Komachi clenched a fist tight. “Nice one! Well done, Totsuka! Let’s start the gift exchange now, then! Okay, okay! Everyone, please get out your presents! We’ll put them all in the middle of the table!” In an attempt to clear the doom and gloom, Komachi took charge.

“Here, I hope this is okay.” Totsuka went first, and then everyone else also obediently did as Komachi said.

Komachi confirmed that all the presents were there. “All good. Now I’m mixing them up!”

“Shuffle tiiiiiiime!” Zaimokuza cried, and Komachi took that as her cue, switching the gifts around and around as she explained the rules.

“So we hand them out and put on some music, and then when it stops, the one in your hands is yours. As for after that, we’ll…just play it by ear.”

“For someone who’s usually so attentive, sometimes her explanations are quite sloppy…”

Just as Yukinoshita said, with Komachi’s lack of clarification, we only sort of understood the rules. If this was a fighting game, you’d need something more beginner-friendly if you really want it to take off.

“Well, it’ll be faster just to do it. Okay, start the music!” Miss Hiratsuka said, and the karaoke remote beeped back at her as she hit the button. It seemed it had a function just for parties like this. What a convenient world.

When the music started, everyone silently passed the presents around, right to left. Everyone was utterly silent.

Bemused, Yukinoshita broke the strangely ceremonial sort of atmosphere by asking, “Why are we so quiet…?”

“Yeah, I was expecting something a little less blasé…,” I said. “Hey, Yuigahama. Is this how it goes?”

“U-um… Well, more or less, I guess. The Christmassy part isn’t actually that exciting, huh…?”

“That was a sad thing to hear… Oh, the music stopped.”

“Okaaay, then let’s open the presents, starting with yours, Bro!”

When Komachi designated me, I picked up the present in front of me and unwrapped it. “Me first, huh…? Let’s see here… Ohhh, is this…a USB flash drive?”

“Gerf, komfuh, koff, okopom. That’s the present from me,” Zaimokuza announced himself after clearing his throat weirdly. *Was* that clearing his throat?

But anyway, this was the present from Zaimokuza? Not what I would have expected. “Whoa, this is from you, Zaimokuza? Hey, this is actually normal and really practical… What the hell happened here?” I’d never thought Zaimokuza would pick something useful, so I couldn’t help but question his motives.

Zaimokuza pushed up his glasses with a proud smile. “Don’t worry, Hachiman. I’ve made sure my plot and world-building materials are already on it.”

“Oh, no, I really don’t need that.”

“Fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Read the whole thing during winter vacation! Now then, from whom is mine gift?” Ignoring me in my misery, Zaimokuza tore open the wrapping on the present sitting in front of him. “Oh, wha, wh-wh-what is this?! It’s…a cushion!!”

Zaimokuza’s hands grasped a squishy cushion.

“Oh, that’s the one from the couch potato set,” Yuigahama called.

“So that one is from you, Hikigaya?” Yukinoshita asked.

“Yeah. A sofa would obviously be too big and expensive, so I got a cushion instead,” I explained. In the end, I hadn’t been able to decide, so I’d bought a recommendation from before.

Zaimokuza mushed at the cushion experimentally. “Herm, this is rather nice. From this day forth, I shall cuddle this during my slumbers.”

“No, don’t, that’s creepy.”

I don’t know if he heard my plea, but Zaimokuza swiftly set his cushion to the side and laid his head on it. “Here, let me try it out a bit… Oh? Nghhh… O-oh, dear god!”

And then his eyes flared open.

“This comfortable, snug warmth, and this fwumpfy softness that mumfs itself into a shape that perfectly fits the body… Ah, I… I can’t… I’m faaaaaaaaalliiiiiiiiiing! …Thud.”

After that was only silence.

“…Oh, Zaimokuza’s quiet now,” I said. “Pretty handy, that cushion.”

Ignoring the snoozing Zaimokuza, we proceeded with opening our gifts.

“Ummm, so then next, Miss Hiratsuka, why don’t you go?”

When Komachi pointed to her, Miss Hiratsuka responded with a nod and picked up her present. “Hmm, I like this wrapping paper… Hmm, oh, hand cream!”

I looked around, wondering just who the gift was from, and Totsuka opened his mouth. “Ah, yeah, since it’s so dry around this time. And it’s got shea butter in it, so it’s really moisturizing. I use it a lot during practice, too.”

“S-Sai-chan, wow…”

“Dang, he’s got some girl savvy…”

Yuigahama and Komachi both trembled. Of course, I did, too.

But Miss Hiratsuka was beyond shudders. “I see—girl savvy… If I use this hand cream, maybe I’ll have more feminine appeal… Agh, I’d like some moisture… I’m so dry…”

As Miss Hiratsuka repeated *so dry, so dry* in a near delirium, I could feel the air around us drying out, too.

My sharp little sister could sense it happening and immediately intervened. “Ahhh! Oh no! The doom and gloom is starting again! Come on, next is Komachi! Oh, this is some pretty fancy wrapping… And inside… Ah, it’s black tea leaves. I’m guessing this is from Yukino!”

Inside the package was a square can. I remembered seeing the same thing in the clubroom.

When Komachi guessed her, Yukinoshita returned her smile. “Yes. I tried to pick a standard flavor that’s not too idiosyncratic.” But then her expression turned a little uneasy. “It’s just…”

“It’s just?”

When Komachi prompted her to continue, Yukinoshita glanced over at me. “I wondered if you were more of a coffee person.”

Ohhh, I see. Now that she mentions it, I do drink coffee more often. I drink MAX Coffee in the clubroom a lot, after all. I could get why Yukinoshita would worry Komachi might drink coffee on a daily basis, as a member of my household.

But her worries were unnecessary. Komachi hugged the tea gladly. “No, not at all. Well, I am more of coffee drinker, since my brother likes it. But you know, this might be a good opportunity for both of us to get into tea instead!”

“Mm-hmm, broadening your tastes is part of the fun of receiving presents,” Miss Hiratsuka said, slathering on hand cream.

Komachi nodded. “That’s right! Okay, Yukino, why don’t you open your present?”

“All right.” When Yukinoshita reached out to the present in front of her, Yuigahama beamed.

“Oh, that’s from me!”

“Ah, are these bath salts? The packaging is cute, too… This is very like you, Yuigahama. I think it’s wonderful.”

“Right! You can use this as a scrub, too!”

“This is some real girl talk, huh…?” I mused. As I watched Yukinoshita and Yuigahama chattering away next to me, Miss Hiratsuka smacked her knee.

“Oh, darn, bath salts, huh…? I got basically the same thing as Yuigahama…”

“Huh? Did you get something similar, Miss Hiratsuka?” I asked, quite surprised.

Miss Hiratsuka pressed her forehead with a beleaguered moan. “Yeah. Argh, I can’t believe I had the same idea for a gift as a girl in high school. Oh noooo.”

“She looks really happy about that…”

But what was this fateful present? Judging from where the teacher was looking, Totsuka had been the one to get Miss Hiratsuka’s youthfully tasteful gift.

Yuigahama’s eyes sparkled. “Huh, I wonder what it is. I’m super-curious. Open it up, Sai-chan.”

“Yeah. I’ll open it now… Um, this is…” He tore off the comparatively plain wrapping to reveal a proud-looking box.

Yuigahama seemed a little confused; I could almost hear her thinking, *Whaaat?* “A set of hot spring essences…”

“Well, these *are* similar to bath salts… But there’s a distinct difference,” Yukinoshita said, pressing her temple.

Komachi didn’t know how to comment, either. “Hmm, it’s less girly and more like, uh…uhhh…like a mature flavor!”

“Urk, I can tell you’re trying really hard to be considerate… Ngh…,” Miss Hiratsuka groaned.

Right before she could crumble, Totsuka smiled brilliantly like flowers blooming. “But I like hot springs, so I’m really glad.”

R-really, now…? If Totsuka’s glad, then, well, I guess it’s fine. It seemed this wasn’t exactly what everyone imagined, but I agreed with Totsuka. “Y-yeah… Well, a guy’d be happier to get these, huh?”

That seemed to help Miss Hiratsuka recover somewhat. “R-right? You’re still too young for this, but a beer feels great after a

long bath, you know!" she said, sounding especially cool and manly.

"Komachi kind of understands the reason Miss Hiratsuka can't get married. It's because she's so much manlier than most men out there, huh?" Komachi said with a sorrowful sob. I mean, it's true that men might be intimidated by a woman as cool as Miss Hiratsuka…

"Okay, then I'm last." Yuigahama reached out to the present sitting in front of her.

"Which means that's the present from Komachi!"

"Oh, it's from you, Komachi-chan? Ooh, I really wanna know what it is. Can I open it?"

"Go ahead, go ahead!" Komachi prompted her, and Yuigahama unwrapped it.

"Oh, it's soap! Thanks! This is the kind that's super-popular right now, huh?"

"That's right! Komachi's using it, too! It smells real nice!"

Ah. So this is what presents between girls are like…

After thinking, *This is peak girl, this is THE peak girl*, I suddenly felt something was off. "…Huh? Do you use that soap? I've never seen it at home…"

"Oh yeah. Komachi only brings it out for bath time. Komachi wouldn't want you and Dad using it, right? That'd be kind of gross."

"Huh…? I-isn't it mean to put it that way? Think of the shock to your poor Big Bro…" *Gross…? Th-there's nothing wrong with using a little soap, right…?*

As the depression started to hit for real, Yuigahama came up with an idea, clapping her hands. "I know! Yukinon, why don't we try using this together, today! Look, and those bath salts, too! I'm super looking forward to this!"

"I don't mind, but…… Huh? You don't mean we'd bathe together?"

"Huh? But we have to, or we can't use them together…"

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama looked at one another like, *Huh? Huh?*

I was also like *Huh?* too. I had a lot of questions here… *Y-you're going to bathe together? Don't say that stuff here! You'll make me imagine things!*

"Hey, Yurigahama—whoops, I mean Yuigahama. Have those conversations at home, okay…? 'Cause, you know…just because."

It seemed even my vague *just because* got the meaning across. It took her a second, but then Yuigahama's cheeks gradually reddened.

"…Ah, y-yeah."

"Yuigahama, you idiot…," Yukinoshita said, almost too quiet to hear.

Uh, the way you were blushing while you said… Even I'm kind of getting embarrassed here… Komachi watching the scene with a smile made the shame even worse.

"Gefum, gefum, morusua… Herm… I've woken up to find a strange scene indeed…" Zaimokuza got up, tilting his head in confusion.

"Oh, Special Snowflake. You just woke up, huh? You could've snoozed a little longer." I could tell her little chuckle meant far more than that. Kinda scary…

Anyhow, the gift exchange—our main event for the day, I'd say—had gone off without a hitch. What else was there to do?

"So we're done with the gifts, huh…? There's no more Christmas stuff left to do…," I said.

Yuigahama and Komachi both *hmm*'d, considering. Then Komachi's face jerked up. "Ah! Christmas songs!"

"Th-that's it!" Yuigahama agreed.

Komachi nod-nodded. "I can't even think of anything else!"

It seemed I wasn't the only one with doubts. Yukinoshita was frowning, too. "Will singing make this more Christmassy…?" she said skeptically.

Totsuka considered. "Hmm… A lot of the classics really feel Christmassy, so just hearing them gets you in the mood, you know?"

"Indeed. One might even say the theme music is the face of the franchise. One might call it a face song! Music can paint a scene, too." After that fairly scholarly comment, Zaimokuza nodded to himself.

But meanwhile, Miss Hiratsuka, sitting opposite from us, didn't look so good. Her eyes were half-closed, and she was laughing like *ga-ha-ha!* "Oh, hey, you're gonna sing? Nice! Sing, sing! If you don't wanna, then I'm gonna sing 'Single Bells'!"

"Is Miss Hiratsuka drunk…? I don't think there's even any alcohol here."

As Yukinoshita said, there was no booze here, but our teacher

had managed to get drunk on the atmosphere. An atmosphere that was sweeping away Yuigahama, too, as she grabbed the mike and stood up. “Okay! Yui Yuigahama will sing! …And you, too, Yukinon.”

“Huh? Hey, why me, too…?”

Yukinoshita initially tried to refuse the mike being shoved in her face, but Yuigahama’s indomitable grin won over, and Yukinoshita reluctantly took it.

“Weeei!” To drum up excitement for their song, Komachi rattled a tambourine, too.

…Well, this is about the only opportunity I’d get to hear Christmas songs from the two of them. So maybe we can just call this our own special seasoning for a Christmas party.

And maybe you could call this our way of spending Christmas, too.

X X X

A cold, wintry wind blew over the road to the station.

Our party had come to an end, and by the time we’d emerged from the karaoke place, the sun had set completely. The crowds passing by had thinned out considerably since the daytime, too.

Christmas was nearly over. Beneath a darkened sky, the alleyway felt somewhat desolate as we walked along.

Yuigahama stretched. “Hnnn, we sang so much…”

“Yeah, it just turned into karaoke after a while…,” I said, wondering what the heck that party was.

Yuigahama didn’t have a good answer to that. “S-so what? It was fun, right?”

“But did we actually thank Komachi and Totsuka properly…?” Yukinoshita muttered, sounding a little worried.

It was true—originally, the goal had been to thank them for helping out. But based off what we’d seen, we didn’t have to worry, I didn’t think. “Well, they seemed to be having a good time, so no worries, right?”

“Yeah, I hope so. Ah, but, Hikki, you’re okay coming over this way with us? You didn’t have to walk us back just ’cause Komachi-chan told you to.”

“Yes, my apartment is right over there, after all,” Yukinoshita said, looking ahead down the lane to the apartment tower where she lived. It wasn’t that far from the station, so there was no need to bother walking them back, but Komachi had wheedled me into it, and now here I was.

“…Well, there was the cake, and your stuff,” I said. “And this is no big deal.”

“I see. This really is helpful, especially since we had that extra cake.”

“But, but it sure is nice to have a whole one, huh?! What a dream! A whole cake, all to ourselves!” Yuigahama said, looking ecstatic.

Yukinoshita gave her a cool look. “If we can actually eat it, then sure, but…it’s quite difficult, you know.”

“You’ve tried it before…?” I muttered.

As we talked, we strolled along the park path and exited out onto a major road. Now Yukinoshita’s apartment was right ahead.

“Oh, I can see your place, Yukinon.”

“Yes. Here’s fine, then, Hikigaya.”

We stopped in front of the crosswalk that went across the main road.

“Okay. Then here’s the cake,” I said, handing it to Yuigahama.

“Thanks.”

“…And while I’m at it, could you take this, too?” I said, pulling two more packages out of my bag.

The girls accepted the packages, but they didn’t know what they were at first. When they suddenly figured it out, they were timid about confirming.

“Huh? Is this…a Christmas present?”

“One for me, and one for Yuigahama?” Yukinoshita inhaled slightly, seemingly startled.

This is embarrassing… They’re just staring at me in shock…

“…Well, as thanks for the cup, I guess.” Unable to look either of them in the eye, I found myself staring off in the other direction.

“Can I… Can I open it?”

“Um, well,” I replied vaguely to Yukinoshita’s slightly hesitant question. As I thought about their reactions when they opened the packages, my hands started sweating in the winter cold.

Along with the sound of the wind, I heard the sounds of ribbons sliding undone. And then quiet gasps.

“Wow…”

“A hair scrunchie…”

Their sighs were warm, somehow, and unconsciously, I breathed a sigh of relief, too.

“They match!” Yuigahama said cheerily, looking between hers and Yukinoshita’s.

“Yuigahama’s is blue, and mine is…pink? Doesn’t that seem backward…?”

“Naw, I think…it’s good this way…”

I really don’t think I could explain why I’d done it that way. I didn’t want to be asked, either. But this was the conclusion I’d come to myself, and I was sure that I was right. I didn’t need anyone understanding it. I think that’s probably just what gifts are.

“I see…” Yukinoshita chose not to press any further. Then she looked up from the scrunchie in her hand and smiled. “If this is your way of saying thank you, then I’ll happily accept it.”

“Yeah, Hikki…thanks. I’ll take good care of it.” Yuigahama locked eyes with me, gently clasping the scrunchie to her chest. That gesture embarrassed me enough that I had to glance away.

“Yeah. Well, you’re welcome to do what you want with them…” I trailed off. My eyes had landed on the light of the crosswalk, which had changed from red to green. “Th-then, see you.” I took that as my cue to send the two of them off.

“Yeah, see you! …Good night.”

The two girls nodded at one another, then quietly began walking away.

Watching their backs grow distant, I turned away myself.

“Right, then…”

With a quiet breath, I gazed above.

The winter night sky was clear, and I had a good view of Orion. There were probably other constellations, but unfortunately, Orion is the only one I know.

So many things are right in front of your eyes, but you can’t really see them. I wonder if one day, I’ll be able to notice all the things I can’t yet perceive.

Relying on the light of the stars and the streetlamps, I quietly stepped forward.

“Hikigaya.”

“Hmm?”

When my name was called, I turned around to see Yukinoshita standing in the middle of the crosswalk. Yuigahama had already finished crossing and was giving Yukinoshita a curious look.

With her hair tied up into a ponytail, Yukinoshita stood perfectly still, until her eyes met mine and she gently combed through her hair with one hand.

The lovely pink of the scrunchie stood out against her glossy black hair, clearly visible even in the darkness of the night.

Yukinoshita’s hand stopped against her hair, hesitating, but when she saw the light had begun to flash, she quietly sucked in a breath. And then with a half-open palm, she quietly waved.

“…Merry Christmas.”

“…Y-yeah… Merry Christmas.”

I was taken aback by how suddenly she said it, but I managed to answer.

Yukinoshita giggled with a little smile at me, then quickly rushed off after Yuigahama, who was waiting ahead.

The two of them stood side by side and exchanged a few words. Then Yuigahama waved wide at me. The blue scrunchie swayed under the cuff of her sleeve.

I watched her wave, then once again turned away. “Guess I’ll head home…”

Though I’d been walking around all day, my steps were strangely light, and I found myself humming.

The curtain of night quietly fell, and a cold wind stroked my cheeks. Yet the lights of the town were warm like a flickering candle, gently illuminating the last hours of Christmas.

I’m sure there are prayers that are never heard and wishes that

won’t come true.

But that day, at least, I was allowed to let it go and breath it out in a cloud of white.

I’m sure that sigh will make someone’s light waver.

Whether you’re alone or with someone else, Christmas will come again.

And so—merry Christmas to all.

Afterword

Good evening once again, this is Wataru Watari! Wait, not like this! Please put up with all those antics as well (after all, I'm Wataru Watari)!

The season is now summer!

I'm sure you're all enjoying the season and thinking, *Hey, it's summer! I'm doin' good*, just like summer praying mantises, but I'm working. Don't get close to me…

Now then, though this book is set in autumn before jumping to the Christmas season, this volume of *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected* consists of the prelude to the latter part of the series, and then a half-time break during that latter part.

The publication timing of the volumes numbered x.5 are all over the place, so if that makes it hard to understand, I'm very sorry to all readers who are reading it in publication order.

Truly, I'm sorry for lots of things.

Okay, so about the sports festival story in Volume 6.5 here—it's been improved and revised based on the story that we wrote behind the scenes for the TV anime extra number one.

With the anime, there are time restrictions and visual considerations to take into account when they adopt content and put together the scenario, but behind the scenes, we were working on something like this.

There are unseen parts to everything, not just this one story. It's very common that you'll just take the parts that are well-done and pretty to show to others. Even if you do get a peek behind the curtain, you may find an abyss.

This is also something that can be said about characters, too. In particular, since this series is written in first person from Hachiman Hikigaya's perspective, his depictions change with his values as time passes. Depending on his degree of understanding, his portrayals will change. Whether that will be digging too deep into the hidden side of things or piling up a mountain of mistaken

beliefs will be up to him, but whatever the case, I think he may not give a one-sided portrayal. Although it's often the one looking who decides which side is the surface and which is the reverse.

Now then, since everything has a reverse side—a hidden side—of course even Wataru Watari has a hidden side. Normally, I'm just putting on this nonchalant face as I carefully ensure you only see a flawless version of me, you know… Huh? I don't look flawless at all? For real? Crap. Oh crap. If even this flawless Wataru Watari that I'm normally showing doesn't look flawless, then oh crap.

Well, not everyone who's dirty behind the scenes is clean on the surface.

The fact is that Wataru Watari also has a heck of a lot going on, behind the scenes…

For example, behind the scenes of *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected*, I've been steadily working on a new series! (Shameless plug.)

And so Wataru Watari's new book is going to be published by Shogakukan Gagaga Bunko, and I'm presently hard at work getting that ready. So before anyone can be like *We don't care; hurry up and get the next volume out, or I'll kick your butt, you useless piece of junk!* I am also working super-hard on the new volume of *Youth Romantic Comedy*. I think new information about it will probably be available around New Year's. For example, information about an extension or something like that! So I would be glad if you would check later for further news.

Work makes more work, and the spiral continues, but I'll try to do my best. Man, I have way too much work, so I've been thinking about my life, wondering what I should do and if I should get some advice, but then this would turn into an ad for the life-advice TV anime *Jinsei* (Life), which will start airing in July on Tokyo MX and others, so I won't. It'd bug me to do anything for Kawagishi-san, its author.

So this has been Volume 6.5 of *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected*.

And the following acknowledgments…

Holy Ponkan⑧: I never thought the day would come when Kawa-something would be on the cover… I never would have expected such rapid progress back when I was writing Volume 2, and having conversations with my editor, Hoshino, like, "This girl will show up in later volumes, right?" "No, she won't…" "I see…

But she will show up, right?" "No, she won't…" "Oh-ho, I see… But —" "No." Your wonderful cover illustration has touched me so deeply, I can't stop crying. The cover of the special edition and internal illustrations were also the best! Thank you so much.

To my editor, Hoshino: I never thought the day would come when Kawa-something would be on the cover… Now I can say thank you for sticking to it, that time. Thanks to you, I reconsidered and thought, *Maybe this character is actually important…* Sorry for doubting. At the time, I thought, *It's just that she's your type, huh? This is why I can't stand people from Yokosuka…* Hey, there'll be plenty of room for Kawasaki to show up next time! Ga-ha-ha!

To all the cast: Thank you very much for your efforts in recording the drama CD. I'm very sorry for writing hopeless scripts every time. The recording was about a year after the lines for the anime were recorded, but all your performances were even better than last time; thank you so much. I'm very much looking forward to seeing you for the second season of the anime. It'll be great to work with you again.

All right, so this is about where I'll lay down my pencil. Next time, let's meet in Volume 10 of *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected.*

A certain day in June, in a lukewarm breeze, while drinking a lukewarm MAX Coffee,

Wataru Watari

Translation Notes

Chapter 1 … Yet again, **Shizuka Hiratsuka** gives new orders.

1 "Ugh, what's me minus me? I guess zero, which also just so happens to be the number of school events where I've been part of the group. Incredible." In the original Japanese, Hachiman uses *ore* (meaning "I") and puns it with *au lait*, as in café au lait, and then says, "If you were to soak me in milk and eat me, I'd probably taste good." There is a popular brand of café-au-lait-flavored wafers with black-and-white packaging.

2 "It's already at climax from the moment you start drinking it." This is a reference to a line from the protagonist of *Kamen Rider Den-O*, who says, "I'm at a climax from start to finish!"

3 "But after every max must come a fall—people like me falling over themselves get more." In the original, Hachiman calls MAX Coffee a *deochi*, a gag where just the appearance of someone or something is funny. This doubles as a pun, as *ochi* (punch line) can also mean "fall."

4 "You know, there's something lewd about the word *laptop*. Sounds like something that would go on at a shady cabaret club." In Japanese, Hachiman compares the visual similarities of the word *nopaso* (the abbreviation of "notebook personal computer") and *nopan* (no panties). The katakana syllables for *n* and *so* look similar.

5 **“Normally, Miss Hiratsuka is kind of blunt, or, like, bludgeoning, blasting, or a Blastasaur…”** *Blastasaur Squadron Rampage Ranger* is the twenty-seventh production of the *Super Sentai* television series, with footage used in the Americanized *Power Rangers Dino Thunder*.

6 **“Um…from someone with the alias Homoo… That’s a weird emote.”** *Homoo*, spelled with a dragged-out vowel, refers to a popular emoji of a slash shipper prowling around seeking BL. ┌(┌ ^ o ^)┐ホモォ)

7 **“While I was zoning out in a rather pleasant mood, watching their *YuruYuri* relationship…”** *YuruYuri* is the name of a *yuri* gag manga. The *yuru* here means “gentle” or “relaxed.”

8 **“Shippable? Is she going to send us somewhere?”** In Japanese, Hachiman said, “I couldn’t tell if the word *inappropriate* [*futekisetsu*, spelled with the “rotten” character from *fujoshi*, meaning “slash fangirl”] was a typo or not.”

9 **“And why’d she bring up HxH? What does *Hunter X Hunter* have to do with this?”** Japanese ships are rendered with an *x*, where English-speaking fandom more often uses a slash. *Hunter X Hunter* is a battle manga by Yoshihiro Togashi.

10 **“*Talk about a certain sudden plot twist for these boys…*”** This is a play on the title of *A Certain Scientific Railgun*, a light-novel and anime series.

11 **“I slammed the Enter key with a *SMASH*…”** Hachiman is again referencing a Jigoku no Misawa (Misawa from Hell) comic about people doing annoying things.

12 **“A straight one-game match! Producer! Geez, talk about a head-on fight—are you Cure March or something?”** “A straight one-game match” is a quote from idol singer Sayaka Yamamoto’s song “Kassai,” the context being, she wants to live life like that. The “Producer!” call is an Idolmaster reference (the

player character is referred to as the Producer), while Cure March is a character from *Smile Pretty Cure!*, who, during her transformations sequence, cries out, "Let's fight with courage, head-on! Cure March!"

Chapter 2 … We meet **Meguri Shiromeguri** once more.

1 **"*What is this, the daimyo paying their respects on the way out of Edo?*"** The Japanese here says *sankin kotai*, part of the system of governance in Japan during the Edo period, in which provincial lords were required to serve two years in Edo (now Tokyo, the home of the shogunate) before being allowed to return home.

2 **"At this rate, we'd be starting a band soon."** This is a reference to the series *K-On!*, which is about a group of girls who drink a lot of tea and occasionally play music as part of a band.

3 ***Nure-senbei*** means "wet *senbei*." *Senbei* are usually crunchy like crackers, but *nure-senbei* are dipped in soy sauce in the production process, so they remain moist and chewy.

4 **"Rice and soy sauce are the dreeeeeam (dream) collaboration. ☆"** This line is from the *K-On!* song "*Gohan wa Okazu*" (Rice is a flavor food).

5 **"…when you don't even have enough to do the fan."** The "fan" is a formation where you have a line of people holding hands. The people in the middle stand straight, while those on the side lean out at increasing angles to make a fan shape.

6 **"I had about eighty thousand mental Hachimans in my brain agreeing with me…"** *Hachiman* sounds just like "eighty thousand" in Japanese.

7 **"Girls don't do gymnastics formations…"** This is actually no longer true, and at most schools, girls also do group gymnastics, possibly due to the influence of Western-style cheerleading.

However, it was probably the case when Watari was in school.

8 **"A name you don't want to be called? Just like the emperor."** Traditionally speaking, such as for emperors, a personal name (*imina*) is not used after death, and they're referred to instead by a posthumous name (*okurina*).

9 **"In my head, I imagined a *youkai* that was just an eyeball running around yelling in a shrill voice."** Hachiman is referring to Medama-oyaji, a ***youkai*** and a character from the classic manga *Gegege no Kitaro*. "Hair that sticks up like an antenna" is also a characteristic of the protagonist, Kitaro.

10 **"*A cosprace… That does sound familiar…*, or so I thought, but was that *Comp Ace*?"** *Comp Ace* is a manga serialization magazine published by Kadokawa. It's most well-known for running Type-Moon manga spin-offs.

11 **"*Is she an idol or something? Is she gonna dig a hole to bury herself in?*"** This references a dialogue conversation with the character Yukiho in the Idolmaster series, where she talks about digging a hole to bury herself in. It's typical for idol stars to have blogs to share with their fans.

12 **"…if you asked me how to spell 'icup,' I'd answer perfectly and get laughed at."** Originally, this was "…if you asked me 'What's *glove* backward?' I'd answer perfectly and get whacked six times." In Japanese, "glove" is *tebukuro*; backward, this is *rokubute* ("hit me six times").

13 **"How beautiful it is to have good friends"** refers to the name of a famous 1951 painting of vegetables by Saneatsu Mushanokoji, an artist and writer from the Taisho and Showa eras.

14 **"*It's the same as the king in Uptaten Towers in* DQV*, or the lady presenter in a* sentai *stage show. You have to answer here, or you'll get stuck in a never-ending loop.*"** In *Dragon Quest V*'s

Uptaten Towers section, you have to give the answer the game wants in order to proceed. The presenters at *sentai* stage shows are stereotypically attractive young women who prompt call-and-response from the audience to get them hyped up.

Chapter 3 … Just as he figured, **Minami Sagami** hasn't changed.

1 ***"Is this Houbunsha? Is this* Manga Time *something-or-other?"*** *Manga Time Kirara*, published by Houbunsha, is a *yuri* magazine.

2 ***The Decameron*** is a collection of novellas by the Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio, written in the fourteenth century. **Botticelli** is an Italian painter who lived about a century after Boccaccio. **"Chim Chim Cher-ee"** is the name of the chimney sweep's song in *Mary Poppins*. **Cherry Boy** (what Ooka is being called) is slang for "virgin." Essentially, these are all just similar-sounding words, and the students are giving joke suggestions.

3 **"Magical banana"** is a rather dated name for basically a word-association game. You start off with *banana*, and so someone follows up with *yellow*, and that might lead to another color, etc.

4 **"Not Nekomimi Mode."** "Nekomimi Mode" is the OP for *Tsukuyomi: Moon Phase*, about a vampire girl and involving cat ears.

5 **Shinran** (AD 1173–1263) was a Buddhist monk and the founder of the Joudo Shinshuu sect of Buddhism. This school preaches reliance on another power—that is to say, relying on the Amitabha Buddha, rather than engaging in specific acts.

6 **Zazamushi** are aquatic insect larvae, and Ebina's mistake is a play on Zaimokuza's name.

7 ***Ebi* sushi** is shrimp sushi and, in this case, Zaimokuza's way of joking about Ebina's name.

Chapter 4 … **Haruno Yukinoshita** continues to test them until the last.

1 "Perhaps this is what communicating with the Ohmu feels like…" Hachiman is referring to the giant bug creatures the heroine communicates with in *Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind*.

2 "…creaking like Musubi or something." Musubi is a character in the bleak classic war manga *Barefoot Gen*. Hachiman is most certainly talking about a particular meme that features Musubi with a syringe of meth looking particularly tense and strung out, trembling and sweating everywhere.

3 "Hogeeeeeeee!" is the common cry of the protagonist of *Kochira Katsushika-ku Kameari Kouen Mae Hashutsujo* (This is the police station in front of Kameari Park in Katsushika Ward), colloquially referred to as *Kochikame*, the two-hundred-volume-long *Shonen Jump* comedy series.

4 "*Captain Sakura and a storm of dramatic adventure*" is the Japanese tagline for the Sakura Wars game series.

5 "*Maybe this is not in fact Hina Ebina, but Vigna Ghina?*" Vigna Ghina is a mobile suit from *Gundam F91*. It sounds slightly more like *Ebina Hina* in Japanese: *Bigina Gina*.

6 "It was super-effective," of course, is a Pokémon reference, and in Japanese, it's spelled out all in hiragana like the Pokémon games write it (to make them easy for children to read).

7 "…I was justice all along…" "I Am Justice! Juspion" is the opening theme for the 1980s *tokusatsu* show *Kyojuu Tokusou Juspion* (Megabeast investigator Juspion), part of the Metal Hero series.

8 "…grab the thread of a spider…" This is from the children's short story "The Spider's Thread" by Ryuunosuke Akutagawa. The story features a sinner who, because of his one good deed, is

given an opportunity to escape from hell via a spider's thread. And so he begins climbing up it, but when he sees the other damned crawling up after him, he yells at them to get off, and that moment, the spider thread breaks. It's a morality story about screwing others over to save yourself, and it's very relevant to Sagami.

9 ***"Are my hands really so worthless? People wouldn't pay a single yen for them? This is exploitation."*** The Japanese here is a wordplay on *aiteiru*, which can mean "unoccupied" as well as something having holes in it. Hachiman says, "Huh? That's strange. I don't think there's any holes in them, though. No ventilation holes, and I don't suck *youkai* into them, either, you know?" Sucking *youkai* into his hand is something Miroku from *InuYasha* does.

10 **"…the destiny of a capable man, a gifted loner elite—a Lolita, if you will."** The Japanese pun here was on *bocchi* (loner) and *eri-to* (elite) to create, somehow, Botticelli.

11 **"Yeah, yeah, of course it was the truth; you don't have to be Detective Conan to get that."** Detective Conan's catchphrase is "There is always only one truth!"

12 **"A lion will throw its own young into a bottomless ravine and kill it." "A lion will hunt a rabbit with all its might and kill it." "One must drive all the insects out of a lion's body to kill them."** Hachiman is adding *kill* to a bunch of proverbs that didn't originally include that word. The first proverb is about being harsh on your children to make them thrive, the second is about giving your all, even for minor tasks, and the third is about eliminating harmful elements from an organization.

13 **"What's with this eccentric family?"** Eccentric Family is a novel series about a family of tanuki.

14 **"…Komachi being the Ultimate Communication Weapon of**

the Hikigaya household…" This is parodying the title of *She, the Ultimate Weapon*.

15 "I was not enough of a devil survivor to survive that sort of environment…" Devil Survivor is a series of RPGs in the Shin Megami Tensei franchise. The original premise revolves around making it through a military lockdown in downtown Tokyo. It's a little apocalyptic.

16 "…just as art quality is not what makes or breaks an anime, the numbers on a report card can only do so much against entrance exams!" The original Japanese here is a play on the Char quote from the original *Gundam*: "I'm gonna teach you that your mobile suit has limits when you go up against the Red Comet!"

17 "A night battle? Is it a night battle?" The term *yasen* was popularized by *Kantai Collection*, of which Watari is a big fan. Komachi's cutesy declaration is just like the sort of battle quotes you'd see from girls in *KanColle*.

18 "Nanoha*'s sold out*" is a form of famous information warfare that was used on *otaku* at Comiket. The *Magical Girl Lyrical Nanoha* industry booth was for many years a popular table, so lies of this nature were told to narrow down the competition for merch.

19 "Seems the type to enjoy night battles…" Kawauchi is a deliberate misreading of Sendai, a light cruiser anthropomorphized as a cute girl in *Kantai Collection*.

20 "Hmm? This is odd…?" is a line that Conan from *Detective Conan* says very frequently. While pretending he's a little kid, he says this before pointing out deductions as if he hasn't already figured everything out.

Chapter 5 … Based on the aforementioned, **Hachiman Hikigaya** has a hunch.

1 "What the heck is a man-hour?" The original Japanese gag here is a pun on the word *ninku*, an obscure term for human labor. Hachiman says, "What's *ninku*? Is it, like, sort of like *Koizora*? No, that's *Ninku* [the name of a martial arts manga]." *Koizora* is a cell phone novel—similar to self-published online fiction. The kanji for *koizora* superficially look like the kanji for *ninku*, despite being pronounced differently.

2 "*…if I'd hit my finger, I might've screamed something like* Kugyu!" Kugyu is the nickname of voice actress Rie Kugimiya, who's famous for voicing *tsundere* characters. Also, *kugyu* sort of sounds like the words *kugi* (nail) and *yubi* (finger) stuck together, or just a weird cry of pain.

3 ***Emiko Kaminuma's Chatter Cooking*** is a cooking and talk show where actress and presenter Emiko Kaminuma invites guests on for interviews, and they also cook with her.

4 "Banging at the nails was starting to feel like part of some curse ritual." Hachiman is talking about *ushi no toki mairi*, which is a shrine visit at the hour of the ox—between one and three AM—a traditional method of cursing someone. The modern version usually involves wearing candles on your head as you hammer a straw effigy of your target into a tree—traditionally, wooden spikes of a length of five *sun* (six inches) are used for the nailing. It's generally considered a weird occult thing now or used for humor.

5 "Stats-wise, I feel like she'd have about 90 Politics or so. Also, I feel like Miura would have around 95 Leadership." Hachiman is most likely referencing the Nobunaga's Amibition series of RPG/strategy games.

6 "I shot a 'Bancho Sarayashiki'–style resentful look at Yukinoshita." "Bancho Sarayashiki" is a classic ghost story. While there are a number of variations on the tale, all versions of the story involve the ghost of a woman counting plates and always coming up one short. The joke here involves the fact that

both plates and sheets of paper involve the same counter suffix for flat objects (*ichi-mai*, *ni-mai*), so Hachiman really sounds like the ghost here when he's counting papers.

7 The **Dempsey Roll** is a boxing move that involves weaving your body side to side in a figure-eight shape. Odds are, Hachiman learned about this one from the boxing manga *Hajime no Ippo*.

8 "…quietly muttering 'Makkunouchi, Makkunouchi'…" Makunouchi is the name of the protagonist of *Hajime no Ippo*, and the crowd tends to chant "Makkunouchi" when he pulls out his signature Dempsey Roll.

9 "Like from Pocky or Kari-Kari Ume. Oh, and there was Otoko-Ume in there, too!" These are all Japanese candy products. Pocky, candy-coated biscuit sticks, are fairly popular even abroad. Kari-Kari Ume and Otoko-Ume are both candies made from Japanese plum. The former is the actual plum; the latter are gummies.

Chapter 6 … But even so, **Meguri Shiromeguri** is watching.

1 "Therefore, loners are wise, and I'm a wise guy." In Japanese, he says, "Loners are wise and in wise-man mode all year round." *Wise-man time* is a Japanese idiom that refers to the moments after orgasm, when a man's thoughts are clearest.

2 Mother Farm is a tourist hot spot / fun family-outing sort of place in Chiba. Hachiman has mentioned it before.

3 "*What the heck, I'm ridiculously psychic; this is wild. Maybe my dad is gonna make me pose nude for a painting.*" Hachiman is referencing *Mami the Psychic,* a 1970s manga by Fujiko F. Fujio (of *Doraemon* fame). Mami poses nude for her artist dad.

4 "It was like she was saying, *Ninja! Why ninja?!*" This bit is a reference to *Ninja Slayer*, a series of novels published piecemeal

on Twitter. They claim to be a translation of some English novels, but this is just part of the fictional backstory. The story is deliberately like American pulp fiction, the kind of novels Americans would write about Japan around the 1980s, and everything is spelled out in katakana, with lots of strange slang to make it sound more American.

5 **"Maybe Superstarman, but that's it."** Superstarman is a character from the gag manga *Tottemo! Luckyman* and is the middle schooler who wants to stand out the most in all the country.

6 **"Beaujolais may have found a way to annually churn out quality you usually only find once every ten years…"** Beaujolais is a brand of wine that very often has advertising slogans (in Japan) like *The best in ten years* and *A great year that comes only once in ten years*. They use these slogans more often than once every ten years…

7 **"…they won't get even a third of it. I mean, the ending for *Kenshin* said so."** One of the ending themes for *Rurouni Kenshin*, "1/3 no Junjou na Kanjou," includes the line "Even if I love you enough to break me, you won't get even a third of it."

Chapter 7 … And now **the final meeting** breaks into action.

1 **The Battle of Yamazaki**, also known as the Battle of Mt. Tenno, is the battle in which Hideyoshi Toyotomi fought Mitsuhide Akechi, who had just killed Oda Nobunaga, and won, taking Nobunaga's authority for himself. It was a key battle of the Sengoku era.

Chapter 8 … That's why **their festival** won't end.

1 **"I just like it that way"** is a quote from Ryoma Sengoku in the *sentai* series *Kamen Rider Gaim*. He's the scientist who came up with a belt that announces a transformation sequence in a rather

unique-sounding way with a rather corny line.

2 **"*No, you're mistaken!*"** is a line Lelouch says as Zero in *Code Geass*—he says it multiple times in the original series, and it's considered a fairly iconic line among Japanese fans, though not really in English.

3 **"A-an air throw… What the heck, is she Master Asia? Is she going to die at dawn?"** "Farewell, My Master! Master Asia Dies at Dawn!" is the title of episode 45 of *G Gundam* and features, as you might expect, Master Asia dramatically dying as the sun rises. The English title is "Master Asia's Last Breath."

4 **"…it was Totsuka, wearing a button-down *gakuran*-style uniform."** A *gakuran* is a traditional style of boys' school uniform derived from Prussian cadet uniforms. It's a bit old-fashioned and less common at more elite, modern Japanese schools (where a blazer is favored), but the military aesthetic makes it an appropriate costuming choice for this sort of competition.

5 **"Just what kind of Egg of Columbus idea is that…?"** An "Egg of Columbus" is a brilliant idea that seems simple once you know what it is. The Japanese gag here had the abbreviation of *koro-tama*, which basically just means "rolley ball" and is the name of some *Doraemon* toys.

6 **"It's like causality has been reversed and I'm being guided by the Law of Cycles."** The Law of Cycles is from the magical girl anime *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* and involves basically changing the principles of the universe into something else.

7 **"…he was throwing out useless factoids about wedges and Vs and the six and three strategies."** Zaimokuza is specifically referring to the "fish scale" and "crane wing" battle formations used by the famous general Shingen Takeda, and they refer to the wedge and V formations, respectively. He is also talking about *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong* and *The Six Secret*

Teachings on the Way of Strategy, two of the seven Chinese military classics (which includes the most famous, *The Art of War*).

8 **"In *Three Kingdoms* terms, you're Guan Yu. Totsuka is Liu Bei. Meaning that at a time like this, you're the only one to get everyone going and lead the army."** Guan Yu and Liu Bei were generals in third-century China whose deeds have been lionized and fictionalized in the classic Chinese novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This novel has been very widely adapted into many forms of popular media, notably the Dynasty Warriors video game series.

9 **"Stealth Hikki!"** is a reference to "Stealth Momo," or Momoko Touyoko in the mah-jongg manga *Saki* by Ritz Kobayashi. She calls herself Stealth Momo because she is so often ignored and unnoticed.

10 **"He was still staggering around, making noises like *gouf!* and *agg!* and *bigzam!*"** Gouf, Agg, and Big Zam are all names of mobile suits from the Gundam franchise.

11 **"But in Yukinon's eyes, anything less than a nonpareil performance was nonfeasance. Is that why Yuigahama calls her that?"** In the original, Hachiman is punning off of "gathering storm." *Yukinon* sounds like *kennon* in Japanese, which means "dangerous" or "stormy."

Bonus track! "When the Flame of That Christmas Candle Wavers…"

1 **"Don't pray to god—your heart shall be crushed. Don't beg for it—earn it. Do it, and you'll be rewarded."** The first part is from the manga *Project ARMS*, while the second is from *Eureka Seven*.

2 **"You have to value your teatime, you know?"** is a quote from the character Kongou in *Kantai Collection*.

3 "…I don't really know about *the World* or *Stands* or whatever…" Hachiman says *world standard* in English, and Yui hears "*Za Warudo!*" or "The World," which is Dio's Stand (a special ability) in *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure.*

4 "The culture's so different!" is a quote from the manga *Historie* by Hitoshi Iwaaki. The protagonist says it a lot.

5 "They say not to count your chickens, after all." In the original, Hachiman is asking about whether he is using the correct counter for live chickens. Like some other Asian languages, Japanese has a system of "counter" words for categorizing nouns. There are generally rules for what you can use a counter for, but they're not always intuitive (for example, using a different counter for live fish versus fish on your plate). The counter *wa* (meaning "wing") is used for birds, but also for rabbits (for historical reasons). It's not uncommon in Japanese for people to use generic counters or the wrong counters, which is why Hachiman is asking.

6 "You, Yukino, and Yui together look like the strongest." This is referencing an Internet meme, a quote from the infamous *Final Fantasy XI* player Buronto, of "*Kore de katsuru*" (With this, I can win!) fame, which has been referenced in earlier volumes: "Equipped with both darkness and light, it looks like the strongest." This tends to refer to RPG types who wield both light and darkness. The implication here is that Hachiman is the darkness elemental in this trio.

7 *Hinedere* is a word that Komachi made up to describe Hachiman a few volumes back, and it's a play on *tsundere* and similar terms usually used to describe girls in anime. It means he seems twisted but is secretly a softy on the inside.

8 "She said *satsuma*, didn't she? So the the correct answer is Kagoshima prefecture." The word for Japanese purple sweet potatoes is *satsuma imo* (Satsuma potato), referring to Satsuma Domain of the Edo period, which is modern-day Kagoshima

prefecture.

9 **"…sometimes you're kind of an apple polisher…"** In Japanese, Yui says, "That reaction of yours was kinda painful…" (*itai* means "painful," but also "cringey" or "awkward"), and Hachiman responds with "No, it doesn't hurt at all. Not even if I put her in my eye." This is an idiom used to refer to someone you dote on or love dearly.

10 **"While Zaimokuza was wheezing with a sound like *fushururu*…"** *Fushurururu* is the characteristic laugh of the villain of *Metal Max 2,* a SNES RPG that never saw an English release.

11 **"*Hikari ni nare!*"** meaning "Become the light!" is what the hero of the super robot anime *GaoGaiGar* says when he punches enemies to purify them by turning them into light.

12 **"Fair Play, Fair Duel!"** is a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* anime tagline, rather ironically, since many of the characters cheat.

13 **"There are no true mysteries in the world."** This is a quote from Natsuhiko Kyogoku's popular series of mystery novels.

14 **"My burning pathos is overflowing."** This is a reference to the famous *Evangelion* OP: "A cruel angel's thesis / will someday fly high from the window / if memories are betrayed by / the overflowing, burning pathos."

15 **"Someone this cute can't be a girl!"** is riffing off the title of *Oreimo* (My Little Sister Can't Be This Cute).

16 **"But she's usually such a Miss Yarukinainen."** This is a play off the character Aila Jyrkiäinen from *Gundam Build Fighters* into a word that means "I don't wanna do it" with a Kansai accent. It's an Internet meme.

17 **"With this mobile suit…I will become a super pilot…"** *Super pilot* is the term *Gundam AGE* uses for that series's version of

Newtypes. *Gundam AGE* is also wildly reviled by Gundam fans and was a massive flop, thus Zaimokuza's derision.

18 "Shining inside the storm" is a lyric from the opening of *Mobile Suit Gundam: The 08th MS Team*.

19 "Now it's your turn!" is a line from Shiro Amada in the dub of *08th MS Team* during his fight against Norris Packard. The Japanese line is more literally "I'll hit you back double!"

20 "My brother isn't wasteful, after all. He just wants someone supporting him." The original Japanese line here is "My brother wants the sort of *fuyou* that is being supported." *Fuyou* means both being a dependent and being unnecessary (Yukinoshita said the sofa is "unnecessary" for him).

21 "*Or is she bashful because you could bash her logic full of holes?*" A pun, in Japanese, this one is on *hanikamu* (to be bashful) and *hanikamu* (honeycomb).

22 "…you must be magic! You're living the life! Livinitani! Magitani!" In Japanese, Tobe calls him a *maji riajuu* (totally fulfilled by real life; *riajuu* is often translated as a "normie" in this series), which then pivots to *majiriatani*, then *Majitani*, which is the name of a minor villain from *Hunter X Hunter*.

23 "…his hand shot up, forming the sign of the horns like Stan Hansen." Stan Hansen is an American wrestler who became more well-known for his wrestling career in Japan than in the United States. He often made a hand gesture with his pointer and pinkie fingers extended, like the horns of a bull.

24 "W…eight man?! So in Japanese, *Hachi*man?!" *Hachi* means "eight."

25 "…could he be from the organization?!" is a line that Rintaro Okabe says a lot in the visual novel and anime series *Steins;Gate*, especially when assuming his mad scientist persona. He claims a villainous organization is after him.

26 "Hey? Let's stop projecting on the cakes, okay?" A "Christmas cake" is an old insult for an unmarried older woman —that is to say, no one wants to marry her after she's twenty-five years old. This has been a dated insult for more than twenty years now, seeing as the average age of first marriage in Japan is now about thirty. Miss Hiratsuka being unmarried at her age is actually not at all unusual.

27 "*Don't make it worse! Stopppp!*" This particular wording in Japanese, *Yametageteyoo!*, is a reference to what Bianca tearily says in the Dreamyard in *Pokémon Black & White* when a Pokémon is getting kicked around. It's since been adopted as a meme among Japanese fans.

28 "My memory of Tobe will disappear in a week…" "My memory of my friends will disappear in a week…" is the tagline for the manga *One Week Friends* by Matcha Hazuki.

29 "Jooshy polly yey!" is a greeting coined by Chiaki Takahashi, a voice actor, singer, and gravure model. It's meant to sound like "juicy party yay" and has no particular deep meaning.

30 "…Komachi commanded (Maybe we should call her *Comma-chi*?)." The Japanese gag here was "Komachi said like she was in trouble" (*komaru*) (because she's Komachi, get it?).

31 "Just when you've taken one step forward, you immediately take two steps back…" This is a play on the lyrics to the 1968 song "The 365 Day March," sung by Kiyoko Suizenji. It features the lyrics "One step a day, three steps in three days / three steps ahead and two steps back." It's definitely too old a joke for even Miss Hiratsuka.

32 "Shuffle tiiiiiiime!" In the Persona series of video games, "Shuffle Time" is an event introduced in *Persona 3* in which the player gets a chance at additional rewards after a battle. Tarot cards are shuffled together, and the player chooses one.

33 Hot spring essences are like bath salts; they're little mineral packs that are supposed to emulate the waters of various famous hot springs, since supposedly, the mineral content of natural hot springs will have different effects, depending on where you go.

34 ***Morusua*** is the cry of a mutilated Furby from a 2chan copypasta about someone who chopped the head off their Furby.

Afterword

1 "Hey, it's summer! I'm doin' good… Don't get close to me…" is from a poem by Naoko Kudou about a praying mantis.

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